

Managing work-related stress



Work-related stress is a reaction to work-related events or experiences, rather than being a medically diagnosed 'illness'.

Whilst it can certainly be the case that there are some associated symptoms, such as low mood, it is the workplace issues that will need to be resolved rather than an underlying mental health condition that would need to be treated, to enable a return to work.

So knowing what to do when confronted with an employee who is absent due to work-related stress can be challenging. That's why we have created a **three-step action plan** for you to follow, where absences are specifically triggered by work place stressors.

It's always best to try to identify the cause of the stress as quickly as possible so please follow the steps shown:

Step 1



Confront the situation Arrange a meeting between HR, the Line Manager and the employee. Invite the employee to bring along a friend, relative or colleague for support if they'd like to. The meeting could be scheduled to take place in the office, but very often a meeting away from the office, on neutral ground, is a better option.

Step 2



Understand the issues Invite the employee to draw up a list of the issues that are causing them stress and then you can work together to prioritise them. For each of the issues raised, discuss the potential solutions and practical management strategies.

Step 3



Set expectations Be realistic, fair, reasonable and practical when exploring solutions. Responsibility, in terms of resolution, lies with the employer AND employee. Agree timeframes for action plans and identify what support, training and monitoring will be needed and who will provide it. Stay in regular contact and, to ensure effective and clear communications, keep records and share with the relevant people.

It may be useful to consider the following Health and Safety Executive management standards prior to any conversations with employees, where work-place stress has been cited as a reason for absence. The subject areas can help to clarify problems and identify solutions. The standards are:

- a) **Demands:** Do employees have the skills, abilities and resources to do their job?
- b) **Workload:** Are patterns of work and responsibilities achievable?
- c) **Control:** What is the balance of autonomy, choice and flexibility? Are the balances appropriate?
- d) **Support:** This includes monitoring, supervision, training, one to one's and appraisals. Are records accurate and regularly updated?
- e) **Relationships:** Promoting a positive, engaging culture.
- f) **Role:** Is the individual's role clear, understood, viable? Are any elements of the role in conflict with other roles?
- g) **Change:** Is the individual managing the experience of organisational change or restructuring? Is communication around the process of change clear? Change creates anxiety and anxiety can create absence. Can more be done to make the impact of change more manageable?

What if my employee refuses to engage in a meeting?

If the employee is advising that they 'can't' or 'won't' attend an initial meeting, then you should review the fit note in the first instance. Fit notes are advisory, as opposed to regulatory documents, and they advise on the employee's fitness to work and not fitness to attend meetings. It is generally accepted that most people who are assessed as 'unfit for work' are indeed fit to attend meetings. In fact, if the fit note states low mood, work related illness, anxiety or stress then this would be an indication that a meeting should take place.

It would be useful to have a conversation with the employee to explain that it's in everyone's interest to discuss the work issues otherwise no resolution will be reached. If the employee continues to refuse to communicate or attend a meeting, then you may need to consider organising an Occupational Health assessment to determine fitness to attend such a meeting and/or consider whether any disciplinary action should be taken in line with your employment or absence management policies. Whilst no one wants to make the situation worse, if workplace issues remain unresolved then it's unlikely that progress will be made and the situation could deteriorate.

If you would like to know more please contact us
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