

Safety Policy Arrangement 30/2005 – Management of Stress at Work

Introduction

The University of Dundee is committed to providing a healthy and safe working environment for all staff. There are considerable pressures in everyday University life. Many of these pressures assist us raise levels of performance to the benefit of our colleagues, our students and the wider community. Improved levels of performance also contribute to our sense of personal satisfaction and self esteem. However, the University recognises that excessive levels of work related stress are potential causes of ill health. The University has a duty in law to ensure that the health of its employees is not adversely affected by their work. This policy and associated guidance set out what the University does to manage work-related stress.

Policy Statement

The University of Dundee will strive to protect the health, safety and welfare of its employees and recognises that excessive levels of work related stress can lead to ill health. This is a health and safety issue which must be identified, reduced and prevented as far as possible. The University will support staff suffering from stress in the same way as any other illness and will seek to control the causes of stress in the workplace. In asserting its commitment to address the harmful effects of work related stress, the University recognises that stress can also be present in the lives of staff outside of work but the University understands that they may combine with stresses at work to produce a greater threat to the individual's health. The University is also committed to providing help and support where appropriate in relation to other non-work related causes of stress. The University recognises that incidents of stress will be less prevalent in an organisation which promotes:

- good health amongst staff
- mutual respect between members of staff across all levels and disciplines
- the adoption of good management practices

Organisation

Line managers have the primary responsibility of implementing measures to identify, assess and control stress at work. They are responsible for ensuring good communication on stress issues within their unit and for fostering a supportive environment in which stress issues can be identified, discussed and addressed. They are responsible for ensuring that signs of stress in individuals are identified and addressed.

Individual members of staff also have a duty to take reasonable care of their own health and that of others that might be affected by their actions. Staff are encouraged to discuss their stress-related issues with their Head of Unit or Line Manager. Individual staff are also encouraged to look out for signs of stress in colleagues and to support them in addressing the problem.

There are also many other sources of support available in the University which staff can avail themselves of, such as, the Wellbeing Contacts, Personnel Services,

Occupational Health and the Counselling Service. Trades Union representatives and safety representatives may also be a source of support for staff.

Arrangements

Heads of Unit must include stress in the risk assessment of their Unit activities.

Heads of Unit should enquire periodically about stress, and should take steps to investigate any known or suspected cases of stress in their Unit. Heads of Unit are encouraged to use the support services listed above and to recommend them to staff. They should reassure staff that any stress problems will be treated confidentially by these services, while attempting to resolve the matter.

Heads of Unit need to review workloads and targets for their staff to ensure that these are realistic and achievable without regular dependence on excessive hours being worked. They should act promptly to manage reasonable workloads when absences place increased demands on remaining staff.

Staff should report stress to their line manager, or alternatively, to one of the support services listed above.

Unit Safety Committees should discuss whether there are stressors in the Unit and how these could be managed.

Reporting

All work related absence will be reported to the Safety Sub-Committee, which will include statistics for stress-related problems. These reports will also be forwarded to the Human Resources Committee. In addition, Occupational Health and the Counselling Service will record the number of staff contacting them directly with work related problems and will provide anonymised statistics to the Safety Sub Committee and the Human Resources Committee.

In addition, the University will instigate periodic surveys of staff to estimate the incidence of work-related stress.

Training and Support

Staff Development will continue to offer courses to help individuals manage stress in their lives and for managers to help them tackle stress in the workplace. Safety Services will provide training to Heads of Unit and line managers on stress risk assessment.

Personnel Services will continue to provide advice to Heads of Units and staff on how to manage stress in accordance with this policy and other supporting policies such as the Sickness Absence Policy, Dignity at Work and Study Policy, and the Family Friendly Policy.

Guidance for Managers

1. Background

Managers have an overall duty of care towards their staff. In addition to this overall duty of care, one of the main purposes of effective stress management is to keep people at work, productive and performing at their optimum level. A certain amount of pressure or demands has a positive effect of raising the achievements of individuals and consequently their self-esteem, but when the demands or pressure are too great, psychological and physical injury can result. Stress can be defined as “*the adverse reactions people have to pressure or demands placed upon them which they perceive as excessive*”. In some cases support from various sources can alleviate the adverse reaction by modifying the individual’s perception of their situation, but in other cases it may be the job design, work organisation, work environment, management style or working relationships that need modification.

While employers have a legal obligation to assess and manage stress at work, it is recognised that people suffering stress may be experiencing stressors at work, at home, or a combination of both. The University can only control stressors at work but will offer help and advice to staff experiencing stress from non-work sources through the same services outlined in the policy and will treat people suffering from stress illnesses with the same consideration as any other ill employee.

Injury caused by stress at work is treated legally in the same way as other injuries at work even though the proof of that injury and its causation may be more complex than a straightforward accident. Similarly, an employee may be considered to have contributed to their injury if they fail to tell the employer that they have a problem or conceal the difficulties they are facing at work. However, as with all health and safety laws, the primary duties to comply fall on the employer. It is the employer who will need to show that it has done “all that is reasonably practicable” to ensure the health, safety and welfare of employees. Doing all that is reasonably practicable means being proactive to prevent stress arising. In particular risk assessments should include the risk of stress in many situations.

This guidance outlines some of the common causes and symptoms of stress. It is intended for use as reference document for Heads of Departments, Schools and units and for individuals with a responsibility for staff. It identifies ways to prevent or reduce stress in the workplace and advice is given on how to deal with stress if it arises.

2. What is Negative Stress?

Stress results from the interaction of environmental factors providing potential sources of stress and individual factors that affect the ability to cope. Stress may be positive (eustress) or negative (distress). These guidelines are concerned with the negative form of stress, which may affect the health, quality of life and performance of individuals.

2.1 Causes of Negative Stress

Negative stress may be caused by: -

- **Physical factors** such as risk of physical violence or poor equipment, ventilation or lighting;
- **Job design factors** such as boring repetitive tasks inappropriate to ability;
- **Work relationships factors** such as bullying and harassment;
- **Work organisation factors** such as change, excessive hours or lack of control over own work.

2.2 Results of Stress

Negative levels of stress at work can effect both the individual and the organization.

Effects on the Organisation

- High turnover of staff;
- High levels of persistent or long-term absence;
- Reduced productivity;
- Low morale.

Effects on the Individual

Individuals may experience a selection of many symptoms such as those listed below:

- **Physical effects** such as insomnia, weepiness, tiredness, headaches, nausea, appetite disturbance, reduced immunity to infections, hypertension and heart disease.
- **Emotional effects** such as anger, anxiety, frustration, depression, despair, moodiness, irritability and apathy.
- **Psychological effects** such as depression, and impairment of concentration, memory, judgement, decisiveness, motivation, creativity, accuracy and in extreme cases, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- **Behavioural effects** such as increased absence levels, poor time-keeping, reduced productivity, accidents and “near-misses”. In addition anger-driven behaviours may be experienced such as stealing, abuse of e-mail, sabotage of computer systems.
- **Social effects** such as difficulty with relationships at home and work, social clumsiness. Occasionally bizarre behaviour or outbursts.

While anyone can occasionally suffer from some of these symptoms briefly, or just have a bad day, persistence of any of these symptoms may indicate that there is an underlying cause of stress. Help should be sought or offered when these symptoms are recognised by the sufferer or others. Many people have at some time experienced stress in their lives and are sympathetic to others experiencing such problems.

2.3 Analysing Causes of Work-Related Stress

Current advice from the Health and Safety Executive identifies six broad categories of potential stressors at work, all of which can take many practical forms. Briefly, these are:

- **Demands** – excess workload, monotonous work, physically tiring working environment, work or responsibilities beyond the individual's skills, capacity or capability, fear of violence or abuse in the workplace.
- **Control** – insufficient control over how or when the tasks are done, little participation in decision-making, highly prescriptive regimes,
- **Relationships** – Bullying, harassment, perceived inequitable treatment, poor management control of workplace behaviour, certain management styles.
- **Change** – systems, technology, workspace, job security fears, changed range of duties, tighter budgets, inadequate communication about changes.
- **Role** – unclear objectives, conflict of demands, additional duties.
- **Support** – inadequate training, isolation from others, remote management, covering for absence.

Many of the stressful situations that arise at work are perceived to happen through management oversight. Managers need to be positive and proactive in their management of such problems.

3. How Should Managers Deal With Negative Stress in the Workplace?

Managers may deal with stress at three different levels: -

Primary level – this is around proactively promoting a low-stress working environment and taking preventative action to reduce or eliminate possible sources of stress;

Secondary level – this is around prompt detection and effective management of negative levels of stress;

Tertiary level – this is around rehabilitating and supporting individuals who are experiencing difficulties such as ill health as a result of negative levels of stress.

Suggestions follow for some actions managers may wish to consider. This is not an exhaustive list.

3.1 Primary level

This is around proactively promoting a low-stress working environment and taking preventative action to reduce or eliminate possible sources of stress.

As stress is caused by the interaction between an individual and his or her environment, it will not be feasible for the organisation itself to eliminate stress completely; positive stress management is also the responsibility of the individual.

- Articulate commitment from senior managers in the University to addressing negative stress.
- Address the taboos around mental health by raising awareness of the subject in staff development events.
- Encourage a culture where suffering from negative stress is not seen as a weakness or a failure.
- Use the staff appraisal process effectively and ensure both appraisers and appraisees are trained so as to maximise the benefits.
- Carry out Risk Assessments around stress as for any other area of risk.
- Warn people at recruitment or promotion interviews of any challenging aspects of the job, such as long hours, travel, deadlines, isolation or heavy responsibilities (although simply warning staff of negative risk is not enough to avoid future liability).
- Avoid role ambiguity by clearly explaining the nature of the individual's role to them.
- Clarify job security and possible career progression routes – or be honest if there is little job security and possibility of progression so that individuals can consider their options. Avoid promising what cannot be delivered.
- One of the chief stressors is not feeling in control of one's own work – give staff as much autonomy and control over their own work as possible.
- Encourage decision-making at the lowest possible level, by appropriate delegation; encourage more participation in strategic decision-making.

- Avoid role conflict, where the individual is torn by conflicting demands, e.g. between high productivity and ethical considerations.
- Ensure communications mechanisms are effective in achieving two-way channels of communication and effective dissemination of appropriate and relevant information (avoid too much as well as too little information).
- Encourage team-working and good relationships between colleagues, with open, honest and respectful communications – relationship difficulties will still occur but there is a higher probability they will be sorted out informally and constructively.
- Clarify that there is zero tolerance of harassment and bullying and ensure all staff are aware of the University's policy, procedures and support mechanisms in the area.

3.2 Secondary level

This is around prompt detection and effective management of negative levels of stress.

- Ensure that all managers and supervisors attend the University's staff development sessions so that they are aware of the causes and effects of negative stress and the imperatives for, and benefits of, addressing it.
- Monitor sick absence levels and reasons for absence in your area and investigate any apparent problems.
- Discourage over-long working hours. Work overloads can be quantitative and/or qualitative.
- There are only really three ways of addressing an individual's work overload – reduce the workload, work with the individual to find more efficient ways of doing the same workload, or give the individual assistance with the workload.
- Use flexible working, such as job-sharing, flexitime, home working or job rotation as much as possible to support individual needs and address domestic stressors.
- Be accessible and approachable to staff and encourage a culture where staff talk about their problems and aim to solve them informally at the lowest possible level.
- Reduce the inevitable stress around change in the workplace by increasing levels of consultation, communication and participation during periods of change – consider appointing one member of staff to be the “change management agent” to have a co-ordinating role during such periods.
- Address problems of harassment and bullying, using the University's policy and support systems.

3.3 Tertiary level

This is around rehabilitating and supporting individuals who are experiencing difficulties such as ill health as a result of negative levels of stress.

Whether stress is caused by work, personal circumstances or a combination of reasons, it is likely to affect an employee's performance and/or attendance, so it is in the University's interest to try to mitigate the effects regardless of the cause.

Managers should refer to the University's absence procedure when addressing any issues of sickness absence due to stress. It is essential that managers keep records of the advice and action they take in relation to an employee suffering from stress.

- If you believe an employee is suffering from stress, give that employee the opportunity to discuss it with you. Discuss any concerns in private, in an unthreatening manner. Try to use open and probing questions in trying to ascertain any sources of stress. If possible, *jointly* agree ways to reduce stress with the individual. It is important for individuals (as well as managers) to take ownership of any stress problem.
- The greater the gap between the individual's perceptions of reality and his/her desires, the greater the negative stress. The aim in supporting an individual is to close the gap between his/her perceptions of reality and reality itself, as well as, wherever possible, reducing the gap between reality and desires.
- Work with the individual to consider moving them to alternative duties or a different job.
- Relieve stress caused by domestic circumstances by adjustments at work, such as a temporary alteration in hours of work to ease child-care arrangements.
- Ensure the staff member is aware of University provision of occupational health, and the counselling service.
- Ensure the staff member is aware of any University provision of health promotion, such as the provision of exercise classes such as yoga and aerobics.
- Offer the staff member training in developing interpersonal skills, e.g., behaviour modification, time management, assertiveness and problem solving.

4 Monitoring and Review

It is not sufficient to adopt a "tick-done" approach in dealing with negative stress, managers must monitor and review negative stress in their area, e.g. by:

- Regular reviews with individuals who have suffered and addressed negative stress to check that the situation is not recurring.
- Exit interviews with staff who are leaving the area or the University.

Managers should be aware that special needs relating to disability, cultural difference, or membership of any under-represented group may be a particular cause of stress and/or may exacerbate distress arising from other factors. It is good proactive prevention of stress for managers to support their staff members' special needs wherever reasonably possible when they are working on preventing and addressing stress among their own staff.

5. Support Available to Managers and Staff

Managers can receive support in dealing with situations of negative stress from Personnel Services and also the University Counselling Service.

Managers may also feel that it would be beneficial if individual members of staff are offered support somewhere else. This may be from Personnel Services, Occupational Health, their Trades Union, Wellbeing contacts or the University Counselling Service.

Stress Risk Assessment

The HSE's guidelines on Stress Management outlines 6 areas to examine, and departments should ensure that each of these is addressed in their own risk assessment. In order to support the completion of a stress risk assessment, a blank form can be found attached to this guidance in Appendix I. A number of 'starter' questions have been given under each heading, which should enable departments to summarise any stress risk they recognise under each area and rate it L (low), M (medium), or H (high).

Where a risk is identified, control measures need to be specified. These could include simple measures such as ensuring that a particular issue is discussed regularly at departmental meetings so that it can be monitored, or insisting that staff take a break at lunchtime. An example of a completed stress risk assessment is outlined in Appendix II.

Communication is an essential part of keeping stress levels down, so having dedicated opportunities for staff to discuss their concerns is important. Heads of units should ensure that time is given to such discussion and should actively lead towards solutions.

Demands

Is there always more work than can be accomplished in the time and with the resources available?

If so, how much of this is necessary and how much aspirational?

Would increased money solve the problem?

Would additional staff solve the problem?

Is the problem only acute when there are staff holidays, sickness or other unforeseen absence?

Are people habitually working longer than their contracted hours?

Are people habitually working through their lunch hour?

Do people find they never feel they have time to do the job to the standard they would like?

Are deadlines often unachievable without excessive overtime or effort?

Do people constantly have to juggle priorities and let some things slip?

Is there no one who can help with the workload?

Support

Are people supported in their prioritisation of work or helped with making priorities?

When a mistake has occurred does your department just look for someone to blame?

Are people supported through personal "bad patches"?

Are objectives and routes to achieve them made clear to staff?

Is the Head of Department visible for enough time to staff in the department?

Is there clear leadership and meetings of all staff sufficient to achieve departmental cohesion?

Do people get positive feedback and thanks?

Do managers take time to ask staff if there are any problems?

Control

- Are people free to organise their own work?
- Is flexible working time a possibility for staff in the unit?
- Do people have enough time on the job to develop themselves?
- Do people have the time to go on staff development courses if they wish?
- Can staff take their holidays when they want within reason?

Change

- Are people given adequate time to train or get used to new procedures before these are implemented at full speed?
- Are reasons for changes always explained to people?
- Are changes “road tested” before being implemented?

Relationships

- Is the department free from bullying and harassment?
- Is there a culture of working unreasonable hours which pressurises people into doing that too?
- Could anyone in the department feel intimidated from raising issues?
- Are there areas where interactions with others/other departments tend to be adversarial?
- Are staff relationship difficulties addressed promptly and is there clear action to improve things?

Role

- Do people have to master too many functions and skills?
- Do people get adequate training and update training on skills?
- Is time ring-fenced to allow adequate training or are people expected to do it themselves in own time?
- Are people faced with conflicting requirements from different customers?
- Are people working for more than one manager? If so, are priorities clear?
- Can people relate what they do to the overall business of running the university?

Stress Risk Assessment Form

Unit	Individual	Name of assessor
Activity	Unique role	Signed
Date of assessment	Date Staff informed	Date for review

Type of Stressor	Stressor	Who is affected?	Control measures	Risk	Further action	Who will ensure the action is done?
Control						
Demands						
Support						

Relationships

Role

Change

Appendix II

Example of a Completed Stress Risk Assessment

Type of Stressor	Stressor	Who is affected	Hazard	Control measures	Risk	Further action	Who will ensure the action is done

Type of Stressor	Stressor	Who is affected	Hazard	Control measures	Risk	Further action	Who will ensure the action is done
Control	Fragmented task completion due to having to react to others - sometimes feeling you have achieved nothing at end of the day.	all	L	Briefly logging things done Weekly summary at coffee on Wednesdays	L	Reviewing if these helps	IS
Demands	High workloads, and difficulty in prioritising longer term activities over reactive work	all	M	Ring fence some time for planned work	L	Regular reviews of targets in dept. Be prepared to change priorities	all
Demands	Long hours	3 staff	M	Short term log of hours worked to assess	L	Consider time off in lieu	3 staff
Demands	People wanting us to take on their responsibilities - "do it for me" attitude	all	L	Ensure policy and procedures state who has responsibility	L	SMT to reiterate responsibilities	IS
Support	People expecting us to sort it when other departments haven't done their work	all	L	Ensuring requests are documented to correct depts.	L	Try to take the matter up eye to eye with repeat problem areas	IS or others as appropriate
Support	Lack of support – feeling that H&S issues not treated with the same gravity as other issues	3 staff	M	Record it. Seek sympathy of colleagues	M	Look for "told you so" cases that can be evidenced	all
Support	Insufficient funding, trying to do more with less	all	M	Business case for greater budget made but not met	M	Try again next year Keep records of work, costs, etc	IS & others as appropriate
Support	Having to chase people to do the things they said they would	all	L	More in writing. assertive reminders?	L		all
Support	Lack of positive encouragement, feeling undervalued	Some staff	L	Everyone make positive effort to thank and praise work done	L	Weekly coffee break meetings	all
Relationships	Occasional verbal abuse	all	L	Grin and bear it. assume abuser has had a bad day	L	Note if it is repeated	all
Relationships	Hassle from customers	all	L	Tell colleagues and have a brief moan	L		all
Change	Uncertainty over procedural changes	Some staff	L	Better communication of changes through regular staff meetings	L	Try to involve everyone in changes planning	IS