

# Stress & stress management

The effect of stress on employees' physical and mental ill-health is major cause of workplace absence and loss of productivity. It also has serious consequences for individuals' personal lives and wellbeing.

Understanding stress and taking action to reduce it is a key leadership responsibility.

## DEFINING STRESS

Stress results from a person's response to a disturbance producing strain within the individual. People experience stress when their attempt to manage problems, taxes or exceeds their coping mechanisms. This eventually damages their physical and emotional stability creating ill-health. Stress is experienced individually; what is stressful to one person might simply just be a challenge to another.

When an individual experiences a threat, the body's defence mechanisms become active. This is triggered by the sympathetic nervous system. The body releases hormones that prepare for the "fight or flight" reaction. Once the threat has been countered, the parasympathetic nervous system engages to return the individual to the equilibrium/steady state.

If the individual is unable to cope with the threat, they will remain in a heightened state of anxiety with the hormones that trigger the fight/flight reaction remaining highly active. If the stress continues long-term beyond the individual's ability to cope, their defence mechanisms cannot work effectively. It is this heightened state for long periods that can be damaging to health.

## COPING STRATEGIES

The most effective coping strategies are built upon the fight/flight reaction. This reaction is inherent to protect us from danger. For example, our ancestors facing a dangerous wild animal would fight or flee. Today, physical exercise can act naturally as an adjuster/coping mechanism to return to a steady state. Relaxation such as escape to a calm environment can also act as a helpful coping mechanism.

## STRESS SYMPTOMS

Behavioural symptoms include irritability, difficulty in making decisions, suppressed anger, concentration difficulties, and the inability to finish one task before rushing to another. People can feel targeted, threatened, tearful and/or constantly tired.

If action is not taken through engaging appropriate coping mechanisms, symptoms such as indigestion, insomnia, headaches, nausea, and skin conditions can result. These can lead to serious physical and mental ill-health. Conditions include high blood pressure, heart problems, digestive disorders, and depression.

## INTRINSIC WORK STRESSORS

Intrinsic factors in the workplace that cause stress include: poor communication, long hours, long commutes, inefficient technology, work overload and poor work-life balance.

Role ambiguity/conflict, poor work relationships and having responsibility without authority are further stressors. Job insecurity, a lack of career development, and poor performance appraisal are additional factors.

Participation, decision-making and a sense of control all play a part in stress at work. There is higher stress-related ill-health absence amongst factory floor and production line workers than among



senior management, primarily because lower-graded workers have no, or very little, sense of control.

## WORKPLACE STRESS MANAGEMENT INTERVENTIONS

Leaders must take action to reduce workplace stressors. Flexible working can help people balance their work and family life. Access to flexible benefits, including sponsored gym membership and the ability to trade pay for additional holiday, is helpful.

Good communication, performance and career management systems, and participation and engagement initiatives must be instituted.

To access the Mini Factsheet series visit [thinkglobalpeople.com](https://thinkglobalpeople.com) and find out about events, webinars and podcasts. Contact us [info@thinkglobalpeople.com](mailto:info@thinkglobalpeople.com)

For comprehensive information on leadership and managing global mobility visit our sister website [relocateglobal.com](https://relocateglobal.com)