

Why This Matters

Stress at work isn't just about feeling under pressure: it can seriously affect health, wellbeing, and performance. For organisations, it often leads to higher sickness absence, reduced productivity, and increased turnover.

Under UK law, employers have a duty to safeguard employees from work-related stress. As a manager, you play a vital role in spotting the signs early and creating a supportive environment where staff can thrive.

Causes of Work-Related Stress

Work-related stress often develops when demands outweigh the resources or support available. Six main areas are particularly influential:

- **Control:** Employees feel stressed when they have little say in how their work is done. Allowing some autonomy encourages motivation and ownership.
- **Support:** A lack of guidance, encouragement or practical help can leave employees feeling isolated. Strong support networks build resilience.
- **Connections:** Workplace relationships matter. Conflict, bullying, or poor communication can be major stressors.
- **Role:** Unclear responsibilities or conflicting expectations often create uncertainty and frustration.
- **Change:** Even positive change can cause anxiety if it isn't managed openly and communicated well.
- **Demands:** Heavy workloads, long hours, or difficult conditions can quickly lead to burnout if not balanced with recovery time.

Recognising Signs of Stress

Stress can present differently in each individual, but managers should be alert to noticeable changes. For example, an employee may appear more withdrawn, lose confidence in their abilities, or begin to arrive late and take more time off than usual. Others might display heightened emotions: becoming more irritable, sensitive, or tearful, or may cope by working excessively long hours.

At a team level, stress may show up as higher turnover, increased sickness absence, more frequent conflict, or a drop in overall performance. If patterns like these emerge, it's worth exploring whether stress could be a contributing factor.

Early Intervention

The sooner stress is recognised and addressed, the easier it is to resolve. Starting a supportive conversation is often the most effective first step. Ask open questions, listen carefully, and avoid making assumptions. Sometimes small adjustments, like flexible deadlines or clearer priorities, can make a big difference.

If an employee is absent due to stress, reaching out early can help. Evidence shows that supportive contact, for example: a same-day call from occupational health can speed up recovery and help employees return to work sooner.

Supporting Employees Through Specialist Services

Not all cases of stress can be resolved within the team. Where needed, referral to occupational health or specialist mental health services may provide additional support. Services can range from fact sheets and webinars, through to counselling, therapy, or psychological assessment depending on the severity of the issue.

The key for managers is to recognise when professional support is needed and to signpost employees appropriately.

FAQs for Managers

How do I know if someone is stressed?

Look for changes in behaviour: withdrawal, irritability, loss of motivation, or increased absence are common signs.

Is stress a medical condition?

Stress itself isn't classified as a medical condition, but unmanaged stress can contribute to anxiety, depression, or burnout.

What should I do if I think someone is struggling?

Begin with a private, supportive conversation. Ask how they are coping, listen without judgment, and explore what adjustments might help.

Am I legally responsible for stress in my team?

Yes. Employers (and by extension, managers) have a duty of care under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 to protect both the physical and mental health of employees.

How can I reduce stress in my team?

Foster open communication, provide recognition and support, ensure workloads are fair, and manage organisational change transparently.

Final Thoughts

Work-related stress can affect anyone, but with awareness and early action, managers can make a huge difference. By creating a supportive environment and responding quickly to concerns, you not only meet your legal responsibilities — you also help your team perform at their best.

For advice and confidential occupational health support, call 01792 321010 or visit insightworkplacehealth.co.uk.