

RESISTING THE RESILIENCE APPROACH TO WORK RELATED STRESS

NEU Guidance for Members, Reps and Local Officers

Introduction

The education sector has one of the highest levels of work related stress and employers have a legal duty to tackle this. This should be done through a stress risk assessment that allows employers to establish the causes of work related stress in their workplace. However, there has been a growth in the view that stress can be addressed by improving employee 'resilience' This approach is ineffective and puts the onus onto the individual rather than the employer.

This briefing will explain the 'resilience' approach, why it does not lead to meaningful improvements for employees and how safety reps should instead seek to tackle work related stress in their school or college.

Work related stress in the education sector

The HSE describes stress as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them' and estimates that around 5 million workers are 'very' or 'extremely' stressed at work. While stress itself is not a disease, it is medically recognised that excessive or prolonged stress can lead to mental and physical ill health such as depression, anxiety and heart disease.

Stress, anxiety and depression cause more than 11 million working days to be lost each year. In 2015/16, there were over a million working days lost to stress, anxiety and depression amongst teaching and educational professionals and teaching is consistently found to be one of the occupations with the highest rates of work related stress.

There is a wealth of evidence that points to the causes of work related stress within education, with issues such as workload, poor work-life balance, Ofsted pressure, lack of support from management being amongst the most prevalent causes.

Employers have a legal duty to protect the health, safety and welfare of their employees at work and this includes tackling the causes of work related stress through implementing effective changes in the workplace, informed by a stress risk assessment. However, recent years have seen a growth in employers, often aided by external consultants, opting to pursue a much more individualistic approach, which focuses on improving employee 'resilience'. This briefing will explain why such an approach is not effective and does not lead to meaningful improvements for employees. It explains how the 'resilience' agenda can be resisted by NEU safety representatives in schools.

What is the 'resilience' approach?

This approach is based on claims that workplace productivity can be improved by making staff more 'resilient' to stress and the demands of their work. There is now a whole industry based on providing 'resilience' training for employers and their workforce. Claims made by such consultants include that they can teach employees to use 'the energy of stress constructively' and 'how to respond positively to the pressures and demands of working life and identify opportunities to thrive'.

Clearly, addressing stress in this way puts the focus onto the individual rather than preventing and removing the organisational causes of the stress. Employers may favour this to a more meaningful assessment of workplace stress as the onus is on the employee rather than the employer. The NEU believes that any attempts to address workplace stress by focusing on the individual are ineffective and fail to tackle the root causes.

Changing the workplace or the worker?

The [TUC](#) explains that the resilience approach often includes the introduction of initiatives aiming to improve employee 'wellbeing'. Examples include massages, yoga classes, fruit baskets and mindfulness. While initiatives such as these may be well received by employees, it is important that they are not used as substitutes for employers meeting their legal responsibilities for protecting workers against work related stress.

Some employers have also appointed employees to roles such as 'wellbeing champions' who lead on promoting 'healthy' behaviours and activities within the workplace. It is important that employers do not use this role to bypass involvement with union safety reps. **It is a legal requirement for employers to consult with safety reps on matters relating to employee health and welfare, including approaches to dealing with stress.** Indeed, involving safety reps in discussions from the outset is vital as they will be able to highlight the importance of stress prevention over resilience.

The NEU is aware that some school employers have attempted to link absence management policies to employee lifestyle choices, for instance by asking employees to confirm that they are making lifestyle choices to improve their health (e.g. eating healthily or drinking less alcohol). Employers should have policies in place, (which have been subject to consultation with the unions), that set out the process for supporting employees with addiction issues and health conditions. However, employers should not seek to make employees accountable for their behaviours and lifestyle outside of work if it has no bearing on their conduct in the workplace. Evidence shows that if people are stressed they are more likely to increase their consumption of alcohol and cigarettes and may not have time to eat healthily. Therefore, a meaningful attempt to tackle work related stress is likely to have positive impact on these issues.

The [Labour Research Department](#) reports that employers in education are trying to 'build resilience in staff' so that they don't take time off sick, and there have been reports of employers offering bonus payments to staff who have 100% attendance. Suggesting that staff can become more resilient to ill-health implies that they are not genuinely ill and ignores that employers have a duty to address the workplace factors that are contributing to, or causing illness. Increasingly punitive sickness absence procedures, with unreasonable 'trigger points' are likely to lead to presenteeism, i.e. when employees come into work when they are unwell. Left unaddressed, work-related stress is more likely to lead to serious mental and physical health problems.

How should work related stress be addressed by employers instead?

Employers have a general duty, under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 to ensure, as far as reasonably practicable, the health of their employees at work. This includes taking steps to make sure they do not suffer stress-related illness because of their employment.

There is also a specific duty, in the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 for employers to undertake risk assessments, and this including assessing the risk of work related stress. In order to comply with these regulations, school employers must:

- Consider the risk of stress among their workforce;
- Take steps to remove the risk; or
- Where removal of the risk is not possible, reduce the risk as far as possible.

The NEU has produced guidance at www.neu.org.uk for employers on reducing work related mental health conditions by tackling stress. The guidance sets out how employers should seek to remove the stigma surrounding mental health conditions, intervene early to avoid issues escalating and contains detailed guidance on carrying out stress risk assessments.

The HSE advocates a 'management standards' approach to tackling work related stress, which allows employers to assess their workplace against six key risk factors for work related stress. They are: demands, control, support, relationships, role and change. The [HSE website](#) contains guidance on good practice for each factor and advice on assessing the organisation in each area and

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implementing improvements. The TUC and HSE have also produced [joint guidance](#) on using the management standards to improve work related stress.

When implementing policies to prevent work-related stress, employers should consider that individuals respond differently to stressors and that various factors may impact upon their stress levels, so a 'one size fits all' approach is not effective. For instance, factors such as existing health conditions, disabilities, caring responsibilities and personal circumstances may increase the potential for people to be affected by work-related causes of stress. Therefore, employers should not assume that all employees will have the same threshold for work demands, and ensure their risk assessment takes this into account. The joint guidance from the TUC and HSE explains that in situations where employees are particularly vulnerable, the employer's attitude towards flexible working, carers leave and recognition of staff medical conditions can play a very important role in supporting those employees.

What can safety reps do to tackle stress in their school?

There is a legal requirement, in the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations for employers to consult with union safety reps on matters relating to health and safety in the workplace, and this includes approaches to tackling stress.

Where work related stress is an issue, NEU safety reps should seek to address this collectively, rather than as an individual issue. It is likely that these problems are affecting lots of members of staff. Safety reps can carry out their own stress audit, separate to the employers stress risk assessment, which is a legal requirement. A stress audit allows safety reps to establish the extent of and causes of stress within their school. A staff survey is the best way to gather evidence, and the NEU offers a national online stress survey, which is based around the HSE management standards. Further advice on conducting stress audits, and information about the online survey are available in the NEU briefing Tackling Teacher Stress, available at www.neu.org.uk.

Once evidence has been gathered, it should be discussed with members and then taken to management. Safety reps are not required to suggest ways for tackling the causes of stress, as this is the employer's responsibility, but they may wish to work with management to bring about changes in the workplace that they know will benefit members.

Safety reps should also request that stress is a standing item in safety committee meetings. If there is currently no safety committee in operation, safety reps should seek to establish one. Employers have a legal duty to establish a safety committee if requested to do so in writing by two union safety reps. NEU guidance on safety committees is available at www.neu.org.uk.

If employers attempt to promote a resilience-based response to stress, safety reps can use the arguments in this briefing to evidence why this approach is not effective, and why employers will not be meeting their legal duties if they follow this process.

For further support safety reps can contact their local health and safety adviser or the Adviceline on 0345 811 811 in England, NEU Cymru on 029 2046 5000 or NEU Northern Ireland on 028 9078 2020.

Further resources

NEU guidance available at www.neu.org.uk

Tackling stress

Preventing work related mental health conditions by tackling stress

Stress survey guidance and request form

[TUC guidance - Work and well-being](#)

[TUC and HSE guidance - Tackling workplace stress by using the HSE Stress Management Standards](#)

[Hazards magazine](#)

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