



Stress Risk Assessment

A step-by-step guide for school management

Introduction

Tackling stress is paramount to effective management of health and wellbeing in every workplace, including schools. While every job brings its own demands and pressures, people's ability to deal with pressure is not limitless; excessive pressure can cause stress, which is harmful.

It is widely recognised that teaching is one of the most stressful professions.

- Stress is the predominant cause of work-related illness in the education sector, according to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).
- According to the NEU's 2017 [workload survey](#), 81 per cent of teachers considered leaving the profession in the last year because of workload.
- A survey carried out by the BBC in 2015 found that 83 per cent of teachers had experienced workplace stress.

There is clearly, therefore, a 'business' case for tackling stress among teachers and school staff.

What is a stress risk assessment?

A stress risk assessment is simply a careful examination of what in a workplace could cause staff to suffer from work-related stress, so that you can weigh up whether you have done enough, or should do more to prevent harm.

Why undertake a stress risk assessment?

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

Employers also have a specific duty under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 to undertake risk assessments that seek to identify, and eliminate or reduce, risks to their employees' health, safety and welfare. Stress is one of the risks to health, safety and welfare that must be assessed. Local authorities, governing bodies, academy trusts and all other school employers must:

- consider the risk of stress among their workforce
- take steps to remove the risk
- where removal of the risk is not possible, reduce the risk as far as possible by any necessary changes in working practices or by introducing appropriate protective or supportive measures.

Who should undertake a stress risk assessment?

In practice, this duty will be delegated to the head teacher by the employer. They may, in turn, nominate a senior member of staff to undertake the task, but need to retain oversight of the process and discuss with the governing body. Any person undertaking a risk assessment must be competent to do so in terms of knowledge and experience. Doing something about stress in schools may seem daunting to head teachers/principals



and other managers. You may not know where to start. The NEU does not seek to blame school leaders for this situation. Stress is undoubtedly more difficult to tackle than, say, a straightforward slip/trip hazard.

The NEU wants to provide assistance to head teachers/principals and others who are responsible for tackling stress in schools and colleges, and who may be daunted by the prospect. We recognise that a collective approach, involving management and trade union representatives, will lead to the best possible outcome. The NEU has produced further guidance for school leaders on preventing work-related mental health conditions by tackling stress, available in the health and safety section of the NEU website.

By following our simple step-by-step guide to undertaking a risk assessment, you will meet your legal obligations without creating a huge bureaucratic burden for yourself. You are likely to wish to adopt a similar approach in respect of support staff.

The NEU approach uses the HSE Stress Management Standards system – a voluntary system which is a useful tool for employers in understanding how to carry out a stress risk assessment. The Management Standards identify six key risk factors, or ‘stressors’, which have been identified as causes of work-related stress.

These are:

- the demands of a job
- the support received from managers and colleagues
- the role of the individual in the organisation
- the control someone has over their work
- relationships within the workplace
- change and how it is managed.

If school staff can cope with the demands of their job, understand their role, have a say in how they work, feel supported by management and have positive working relationships, including in times of change, they are unlikely to suffer from work-related stress. These factors should be considered on a whole school basis, rather than relating to individuals.

Step-by-step guide

1. Explain to staff what you are planning to do and why, and seek their active support for the process.

2. Gather evidence

The obvious first step is to find out whether staff at your school are suffering from work-related stress and if so, why. Your first step, therefore, is to gather evidence.

A good way of gathering evidence is to survey your staff. The NEU has devised two questionnaires to help you.

The first, called the Wellbeing Ready Reckoner, and attached at Appendix 1, is designed to elicit information about stress levels generally, ie whether staff feel stressed by their work. Unless this indicates that there are high levels of wellbeing among staff (in which case, revisit the issue in six months), you can then go on to use a second survey, the



Stress Survey attached at Appendix 2, which will identify the causes of stress, grouped according to the HSE Stress Management Standards approach.

A good return is essential to get a representative sample. Involving trade union representatives with the initiative will help improve the response rate. Note that staff may be reluctant to complete a survey honestly unless their anonymity is guaranteed. Also, allow adequate time for staff to complete the questionnaires (several days at least). The timing for completion of the questionnaires is important too. Mid-term/end of term responses will give a more accurate picture than those completed right at the beginning of term, when staff are refreshed from their holiday.

To supplement the findings of the questionnaires, you should also look at data from other sources, including:

- sickness absence figures
- employee turnover
- exit interviews
- return to work interviews
- reports from union safety representatives and safety committees
- number of referrals to occupational health.

3. Present findings to staff and union representatives

This could be done at a staff meeting or Inset day, or through your school's safety committee. The important point is that staff should be consulted on the findings and given the opportunity to suggest possible changes to working practices which would reduce stress levels. Concentrate on 'hot spots' or priority areas. You do not need to tackle everything at once.

4. Making changes

You may wish to take account of the following ideas, when looking at the six Management Standards 'stressors', and discuss with staff and union representatives which would make a difference, depending on the principal stressors in your school.

Demands

It is reasonable to expect that staff should be given achievable demands in relation to their hours of work.

The following strategies may help, if workload is highlighted as a key stressor:

- The introduction of a 1,265 hours directed time budget, re-negotiated annually, where this does not already exist.
- The rescheduling of other activities, for example, report writing at times of peak activity.
- A limit to after-school meetings (an average of one per week over a term is what the NEU recommends).
- Bringing in additional resources to relieve workload at peak times of the year.
- The opportunity for teachers to take a genuine break at lunch time. The NEU recommends a break of at least one hour.
- No expectation of an immediate response to emails or a response to emails outside of working hours.



- Consideration of the impact on workload of each new initiative before it is introduced.
- Consultation on the introduction of a work/life balance policy. The NEU has a model work/life balance policy, available on the website.

These are just suggestions – you need to give staff the opportunity to come up with their own ideas for workload reduction.

Support

Staff should feel that they receive adequate information and support from management. The following points may help stimulate discussion in this area.

Accessibility

- Check whether staff would welcome an open-door policy (so far as is reasonably possible).
- Feedback
- Do staff feel that good work is praised and effort acknowledged?
- How can the process of lesson observation be improved so staff feel supported? The NEU model observation protocol is available on the NEU website.
- Practical support
- Adequate administrative and technical support will help staff concentrate on their core duties. Are staff satisfied with current arrangements?
- An effective system of induction for new and supply staff makes life much easier for these teachers. For example, provision of welcome packs, maps, timetables, a copy of the behaviour policy, ICT passwords, etc. How could this be developed?
- Individual consideration
- Flexibility, so far as is reasonably possible, when time off is needed, is always appreciated – do staff understand the criteria for granting such requests and are they satisfied with current arrangements?
- Are there concerns about the application of the trigger periods in absence monitoring procedures?
- Are staff aware of the occupational health and welfare support mechanisms that are available to them?

Role

For this standard to be met people need to understand their role within the organisation. You need to ensure, so far as is possible, that the different requirements upon employees are compatible and that sufficient information is provided to enable employees to understand their role.

- Do individuals have a clear picture about their work objectives, your expectations of them and the responsibilities of their job? If a job changes, then that needs to be reflected in a revised job description.
- Does the school handbook explain clearly the roles of all staff?

Control

All staff should be satisfied that they are able to have some say about the way they work. The following points could be discussed.

- Empowerment



- Do staff feel they have too much authority delegated to them, do they feel they are managed 'under a microscope', or is the balance about right?
- Do staff have control over the way in which lesson plans are produced?
- If the way that classroom observation is undertaken is unacceptable, whether in terms of the manner or overall number, seek agreement on a classroom observation model protocol.
- Development
 - Do staff feel that they are encouraged, and have enough opportunities, to go on training courses to develop in their role, and use the new skills acquired?
 - Can they access mentoring and coaching where necessary?
 - Can they access continuing professional development (CPD) on a fair and equitable basis?
 - Can they use training days for individual CPD? If not, could this be introduced?

Relationships

Meeting the 'relationships' standard involves promoting positive working to avoid conflict as well as dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

How can head teachers, supported by the leadership team, help achieve this standard?

Managing conflict

- The school behaviour policy should be robust and adhered to. Do staff have any concerns?
- Discipline, grievance and bullying/harassment procedures for staff should be in place and accessible to staff. Are staff satisfied that, where bullying or harassment is taking place, management takes steps to stop the behaviour?
- Do staff feel encouraged to report violent incidents, including verbal abuse, and are victims offered support, with appropriate management action taken?
- Complaints should be taken seriously and investigated. Do staff have any concerns in this respect?

Change

Staff need to feel that management engages with them during any period of organisational change. Discuss with staff how the following three good practice recommendations could be implemented in your school.

- Change of whatever sort should be preceded by consultation with staff. Where appropriate, training to enable staff to cope with new systems, initiatives or equipment should be offered.
- Organisational change needs to be accompanied by suitable resources.
- Whenever the impact of a new initiative/workload demand is being considered, work/life balance should be taken into account, in order to achieve downward pressure on working hours.

Next steps

Following the meeting, or series of meetings, with staff, you will be able to devise an action plan for tackling the particular issues in your school which are causing stress. It is essential that the consultation with staff leads to concrete action for reducing stress,



based on what have been identified as the key stressors. Without this the risk assessment will not be complete.

5. All that remains is for a review process to be established. This could involve including stress as a regular item on the agenda of health and safety committee or staff meetings, so that new stressors can be identified and addressed.



Appendix 1 NEU Wellbeing Ready Reckoner

This questionnaire may be used by school management as the starting point for a stress risk assessment. The findings will give an indication of general levels of stress. The NEU Stress Survey (below) can then be used to identify the causes of stress.

Higher scores are suggestive of greater levels of wellbeing among subjects of the questionnaire, while lower totals tend to indicate elevated degrees of stress/poor mental health. Note that a score of 100 or more does not necessarily indicate the absence of a problem. Wherever evidence of stress emerges, the earlier it is tackled, the easier it is to put right. Union representatives and local officers will always be willing to work with school management when there is a genuine desire to tackle work-related stress.

Instructions

For each of the following questions, enter the number matching the description which most closely represents how you feel.

1 = Not at all 2 = Not much 3 = Sometimes 4 = Mostly 5 = Very much so

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| Do you feel able to concentrate on what you are doing at school? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you feel that you are playing a useful part in school life? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you feel capable of making decisions at school? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you feel generally relaxed in your home and school life? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you feel that most problems you encounter at school can be surmounted? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you generally manage to keep your sense of humour? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you feel happy at work, all things considered? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Are you sleeping well? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Are you eating well? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Are you drinking sensibly? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you cope well with changes to your job? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Do you have a reasonable amount of energy? | <input type="checkbox"/> |



Do you feel in control of your job?

Do you feel you are coping well in the classroom?

Do you receive appropriate support when you need it?

Do you get on well with your pupils?

Do you get on well with your colleagues?

Do you get on well with your managers?

Do you feel free from the threat of bullying/harassment at school?

Do you enjoy a reasonable degree of autonomy, unaffected by excessive monitoring regimes?

Do you manage to leave work on time fairly regularly?

Do you find your job satisfying and fulfilling?

Do you have a life outside work?

Do you intend to remain in teaching for the foreseeable future?

Do you look forward to returning to school after a weekend or holiday?

Now add up your score

More than 100 = low evidence of stress, but see caveat above

51 to 100 = moderate evidence of stress

Up to 50 = high evidence of stress



Appendix 2 NEU Stress Survey

Instructions

Rank the following statements from 1 to 5

1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Ambivalent; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree

		1	2	3	4	5
	Demands					
1.	My physical working conditions are acceptable					
2.	Our rest facilities are clean and well maintained					
3.	My total working hours are satisfactory					
4.	The number of after-school meetings is manageable					
5.	Deadlines and time pressures are achievable and reasonable					
6.	Ofsted/Estyn inspections do not cause me excessive pressure					
7.	The balance between work and home life is about right					
8.	The school values the time I put in at home					
9.	I am able to take a proper break during the school day					
10.	Lesson planning requirements are realistic					
11.	Marking requirements are sensible and not overly bureaucratic					
	Control	1	2	3	4	5
12.	I have opportunities to express my ideas and points of view					
13.	I have enough time to carry out all of my tasks					
14.	Classroom observation is not excessive					
15.	I am encouraged to use my skills and initiative to do my work					
16.	I feel trusted by management to carry out my role					
	Support	1	2	3	4	5
17.	I receive appropriate training					
18.	My managers are supportive					
19.	I regularly receive positive feedback on my own work					
20.	There are enough support staff in the school					
21.	The school benefits from effective leadership					
22.	The appraisal system is supportive rather than critical					
	Relationships	1	2	3	4	5
23.	I have a good relationship with my line manager					
24.	I get on well with colleagues					
25.	Management promotes positive behaviours to avoid conflict and ensure fairness					
26.	Staff are able to complain without risk of repercussions					



27.	I rarely have to deal with disruptive pupils					
28.	I rarely have to deal with violent pupils					
29.	I do not have to worry about violence from aggressive parents					
	Role	1	2	3	4	5
30.	I'm clear about what is expected of me at work					
31.	My skills are well used					
32.	I feel valued in my role					
	Change	1	2	3	4	5
33.	I can cope with the pace of organisational or curriculum change					
34.	I do not struggle with new initiatives					
35.	There is full staff consultation when any significant change is proposed					
36.	Changes are accompanied by appropriate support and training, where necessary					

Selecting up to five statements, indicate which factors listed above have the biggest impact on your workplace stress. List the numbers below:

Please list any issues causing work-related stress which are not addressed in the questions above (continue on a separate sheet if necessary):

Return completed questionnaires to:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.