

Stress and mental health issues – practical messages for senior and other managers

This note provides basic advice for those in senior positions, in companies of any size...

Managing directors and other senior staff set, deliberately or otherwise, the *tone and culture* in their companies. This includes how the company approaches the prevention and management of stress or other mental health issues.

To be better at preventing and, if necessary, managing mental health issues at work, you don't have to be a perfect manager, or become a stress counsellor, and you don't have to ask your employees leading questions about stress and mental health issues. But often you can help immensely simply by being a *good listener*. Encouraging positive communication on these issues will help the company and its employees to be healthier and more productive.

Key messages for all senior managers...

- How managers lead, sets the management and wider company culture
- Employee health and wellbeing are key contributors to increased productivity and company performance
- Pressure is *not* the same as stress. While reasonable *pressure* (such as deadlines) can lead to the required performance, *stress* is when individuals have a negative – possibly even harmful - reaction to *excessive pressure*. This means that stress is *never good* for either individual or company performance, or for health or wellbeing.
- Stress and mental health issues such as depression and mental disorder may be connected, but they are not the same. Don't simply make assumptions if you become aware of a problem, find out more by *listening* to any affected employee.
- Companies are required by law* to prevent *harm* to individuals *due to stress at work*. But when there is workplace stress, productivity tends to fall rapidly, so take early, positive action.

*The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999

Some key causes and contributors to stress and mental health issues

Below are some of the key causes of workplace stress and contributors to other mental health issues that managers should consider and, if necessary, address:

- lack of control over work activities, or poorly defined roles
- poor workplace communication
- insufficient training
- continuous long or anti-social working hours
- unreasonable performance demands
- excessive time away from home and family, and
- workplace conflict, or bullying.

Key questions for all managers to consider...

- Take an honest look at what you are asking employees to do – is it reasonable?
- If you think it might not be, what could you do to improve the situation?
- Are you listening to what employees are saying about their work experience?
- Ask yourself, are your employees confident they could raise any issues linked to workplace (or other) stress and mental health, if there were any?
- How would *you* identify that employees are under workplace stress?
- Is any employee actually showing signs of stress, new 'out of character' or other negative behaviours, or mental health issues?

Remember, there is not only a social case, but a strong business case for promoting employee mental health and well-being, and tackling work-related *stress*.

Even simple management steps, such as those above, can make a major and positive difference.