Stress at work

With an average of 40 days of unpaid overtime worked a year, Britons work the longest hours in Europe. Long hours and a heavy workload can cause stress. In 2008/09 about 415,000 people in the UK reported work-related stress at a level they believed was making them ill.

Psychological problems, including stress, anxiety, and depression, are the underlying reason for one in five visits to a GP.

Some pressure at work can be motivating, but when the pressures or demands become excessive it can lead to work-related stress.

Stress is “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other demands placed on them”, according to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

Stress symptoms include a pounding heart or palpitations, a dry mouth, headaches, odd aches and pains and loss of appetite for food and sex.

Work stress can be sparked by things such as a formal warning, bullying, victimisation, increased work pressure, deadlines and management changes.

The way you deal with stress can encourage unhealthy behaviour, such as smoking and drinking too much, which can increase your risk of heart disease.

Good stress management in the workplace is therefore critical to your overall health.

Life coach Suzy Greaves says one of the key skills to managing workplace stress is knowing how to say no.

“I’m constantly challenging clients who say they have no choice but to overwork,” she says. "I coach people to become empowered and believe they have a choice.”

She explains that saying yes can win you brownie points in the short term, but if you take on too much and fail to deliver, “it can be a disastrous long-term strategy”.

“Have confidence in your ‘no’ when you think it’s the right decision, even though it may not be the most popular one,” she says. “In the long term, your ability to say no will be one of your most valuable attributes.”
Health and Safety Executive

- Management Standards: learn about the key workplace stressors.
- Tools to help manage work-related stress.

Greaves says you can prevent exhaustion by knowing how much work you can take on. By taking on too much, you could end up doing nothing well.

Calculate how long you'll need to deal with your current workload so that you can see if you have any extra capacity.

“If you’re extremely busy and your boss asks you to do more, you can say no. Outline your reasons in a specific, measurable way, but always offer a solution.”

Learn to recognise the physical effects of stress and do something about it before it makes you really ill. Beware of work stress spilling over into other areas of your life.

Whatever the source of your stress, speak to your manager or someone in your organisation that you feel comfortable talking to. Or get outside help.

Employers have a duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees. They're also required to conduct risk-assessments for work-related stress.

If the problem is not work-related, they may be able to support you in some way or help to take some pressure off you at work while you resolve the stress in your personal life.

The HSE supports anyone who is responsible for tackling work-related stress in an organisation.

That might be the person who has responsibility for human resources, a health and safety officer, trade union representatives or line managers.

The HSE believes good management practices can help reduce work-related stress. It offers a management standards approach to help employers take sensible and practical steps to minimise stress in the workplace.

Your GP can also help. Doctors aren't experts in employment law, but they can help you analyse the situation, explore the psychological background and refer you to more specialised help if necessary.