Workplace Stress: A Manager's Guide to Recognising and Managing It

Workplace Safety · Published 3 April 2026 by Integral Safety Ltd · integralsafetyltd.co.uk/blog/workplace-stress-a-manager-s-guide-to-supporting-your-team



The Scale of the Problem

Work-related stress, anxiety and depression remain among the most common causes of long-term sickness absence reported by UK employers. Unlike a slip, a trip or a manual handling injury, stress

rarely has a single obvious cause, which is exactly why it gets overlooked until someone is already off work or has handed in their notice.

For a business, the cost is not just the absence itself. It is the recruitment and retraining that follows, the strain on colleagues covering the gap, and the slow decline in standards and goodwill that often precedes a resignation. Treating mental health with the same discipline as a physical hazard, through proper risk assessment, monitoring and follow up, is both a legal requirement and good management practice.

Your Legal Duties as an Employer

Section 2 of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 requires you to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of your employees. That duty covers psychological harm as well as physical injury. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 go further, requiring a suitable and sufficient risk assessment of all the risks your employees face at work, including the risk of work-related stress.

If you employ five or more people, the significant findings of that assessment must be recorded in writing, not kept as a vague intention in a manager's head. Where stress tips into a diagnosed condition such as an anxiety disorder or depression, the Equality Act 2010 may also apply, bringing a duty to make reasonable adjustments. Risk assessments covering stress should be reviewed regularly, and again after any significant change such as a restructure, a change of premises, a merger of teams, or a serious incident or complaint.

Many businesses we work with across the East Midlands already have a generic stress policy sitting in a folder somewhere. The gap is almost always in the doing: nobody has actually assessed where the pressure points are in that particular workplace, and nobody owns the actions that come out of it.

Recognising the Signs of Stress

Stress shows up differently from person to person, which is why managers need to know their teams well enough to notice a change from someone's normal pattern, rather than looking for a single textbook symptom. Common indicators include:

- Changes in mood, irritability or withdrawal from colleagues
- Increased sickness absence, particularly short, frequent episodes
- Falling performance, missed deadlines or uncharacteristic mistakes
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Physical complaints such as headaches, fatigue or stomach problems
- Changes in working hours, arriving very early or leaving very late
- Increased reliance on caffeine, alcohol or other coping behaviours

Early intervention matters. The longer stress goes unaddressed, the more likely it is to lead to long-term absence, a formal grievance or a resignation that an earlier, honest conversation could have

avoided.

The Six Management Standards

A recognised UK framework for tackling work-related stress identifies six areas of work design that, if poorly managed, are linked to higher stress levels, lower productivity and more sickness absence. Using these as headings gives structure to what can otherwise be a vague conversation:

- **Demands:** workload, work patterns and the physical work environment. Employees should be able to cope with the demands placed on them.
- **Control:** how much say employees have over how they do their work. Greater autonomy generally supports better wellbeing.
- **Support:** the encouragement, resources and information provided by the organisation, line managers and colleagues.
- **Relationships:** promoting positive working practices to avoid conflict, and dealing promptly with unacceptable behaviour such as bullying.
- **Role:** whether people understand their role and responsibilities, and whether conflicting demands are avoided.
- **Change:** how organisational change is managed, consulted on and communicated.

Walking through these six areas with your management team is a practical way to structure a stress risk assessment.

Carrying Out a Stress Risk Assessment

A stress risk assessment follows the same logic as any other risk assessment: identify the hazard, decide who might be harmed and how, evaluate the risk, put controls in place, record the findings, and review them. Responsibility for carrying it out sits with the employer, but in practice it is usually led by a manager or HR, often with input from a competent person or external consultancy where the organisation lacks the time or expertise.

Involve employees directly. They are best placed to identify what is actually causing them pressure and what would genuinely help, so anonymous surveys, team discussions and confidential one-to-ones all have a place. A good assessment is not a generic template copied from the internet; it names specific pressure points in your workplace, assigns an owner to each action, sets a realistic timescale, and is signed off by someone with the authority to make changes.

What commonly goes wrong is that the assessment is written once, filed and never looked at again. Review it on a regular schedule, and straight after any restructure, serious complaint or spike in short-term absence. Keep records of the assessment, the actions taken and by when, any anonymised survey data, and sickness absence trends by team or department so you can spot patterns early. Store individual case notes about an employee's mental health confidentially, separate from their general personnel file.

Practical Steps for Managers Day to Day

Most of the heavy lifting on workplace stress happens in ordinary daily management, not in a once-a-year document. Useful habits include:

- Regular, genuine one-to-ones where workload is discussed honestly, not just performance targets
- Keeping workloads realistic and flagging when a team is consistently stretched beyond capacity
- Giving people as much control as possible over how and when tasks get done
- Being clear about roles and expectations, particularly after a reorganisation
- Communicating change early and honestly, even when the detail isn't finished
- Training managers properly, for example through an IOSH Managing Safely course, so they understand their health and safety responsibilities rather than relying on instinct

The pressures look different by sector. A care home dealing with rota gaps and emotionally demanding work faces very different stressors to a warehousing and logistics operation running tight shift patterns and seasonal peaks, so controls that work in one setting will not simply transfer to another.

Supporting Someone Who Is Struggling

If you notice the signs in an employee, have a supportive conversation in private rather than waiting for them to come to you. Listen without judgement, ask what would help, and work on practical solutions together rather than assuming you know the answer. Temporary adjustments to workload, hours or responsibilities while someone recovers are often far cheaper than losing them to long-term absence.

Signpost people to the right support. An Employee Assistance Programme, where you have one, is a good first step, and an occupational health provider can advise on fitness for work and any adjustments needed. Mental health charities also offer support outside the workplace. A calm, consistent approach, repeated over time, is what actually changes a workplace culture.

Managing stress properly is part of a wider approach to health and safety, not a separate exercise. If you need help putting a stress risk assessment in place or reviewing your existing policy, Integral Safety supports employers across Coalville and the wider East Midlands with practical, workable consultancy. We also deliver stress awareness training for managers and staff at your premises, helping teams recognise the signs early and respond with confidence. Get in touch to talk through what your business needs.

Talk to Integral Safety Ltd

We are health and safety consultants based in Coalville, Leicestershire, working with businesses across the East Midlands. If anything in this guide applies to your workplace, we can help.

Phone	01530 382 150 or 01664 400 450
Email	info@integralsafetyltd.co.uk
Website	integralsafetyltd.co.uk

This guide is general information about UK health and safety law and practice, correct as at 11 November 2026. It is not advice on your particular circumstances. The latest version is at https://integralsafetyltd.co.uk/blog/workplace-stress-a-manager-s-guide-to-supporting-your-team.