The Management of Stress Managers Toolkit

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) define stress as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them'. Recent research shows that this 'adverse reaction' can seriously undermine the quality of people's working lives and, in turn, the effectiveness of the workplace.

Introduction

Stress takes many forms. As well as leading to anxiety and depression it can have a significant impact on an employee's physical health. Research links stress to heart disease, back pain, headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances and alcohol/ drug dependency.

People respond to pressure in different and individual ways. Much will depend on an employee's personality, experience, motivation and the support available from managers, colleagues, family and friends.

This toolkit aims to help managers reduce stress at work, as well as preventing it happening in the first place. This means doing something about the main underlying causes of stress as well as coping with the effects of stress.

Pressure vs Stress

There has in the past been some confusion between pressure and stress. Some people think it is the same thing but it isn't. Stress is a response to pressure (or lack of pressure) and it occurs when there is a perceived inappropriate level of pressure.

Being under pressure can often improve performance but when demands and pressures become excessive they can lead to stress – see Performance vs. Pressure Curve below.

Performance vs Pressure Curve

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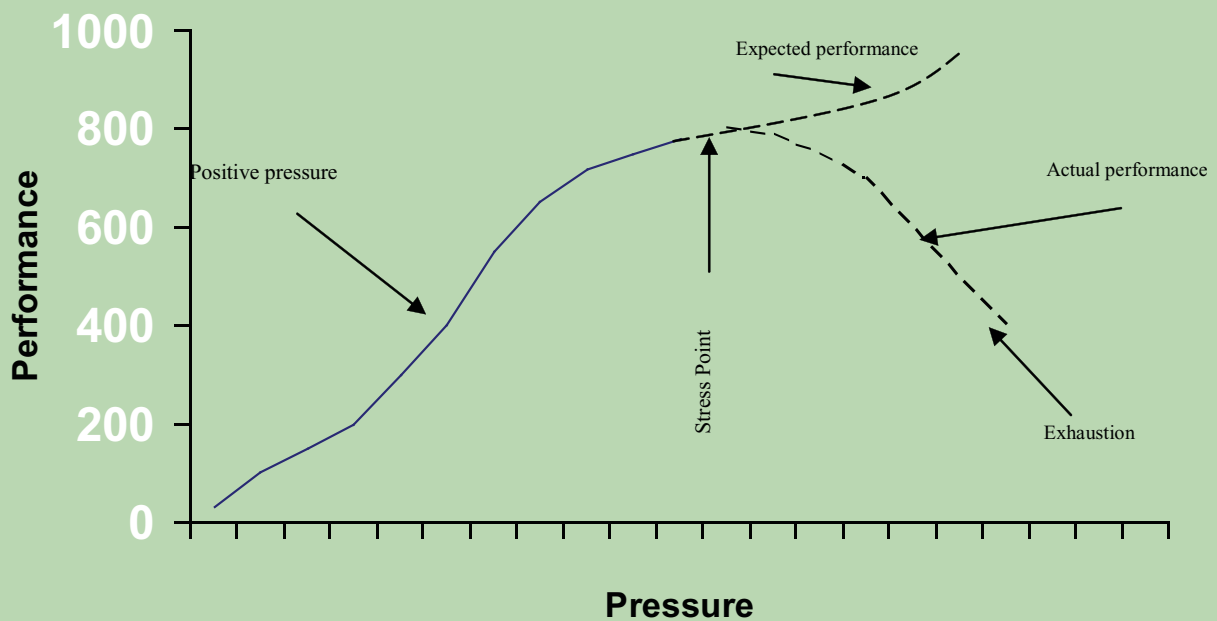
Health and Safety Management Standards for Tackling Work Related Stress

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) have produced the following Management Standards to help employers measure their performance in managing the key causes of stress at work and identify areas for improvement.

The standards look at the *demands* made on employees; the level of *control* employees have over their work; the *support* employees receive from managers and colleagues; the clarity of an employee's *role* within the organisation; the nature of *relationships* at work; and the way that *change* is managed.

These standards are based on extensive research and their approach is to encourage and help organisations to continuously improve the way they manage work related stress.

Details of the standards, as set out by the HSE, are given below.

HSE Management Standards

DEMANDS

Includes issues like workload, work patterns, and the work environment

The standard is that:
- Employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs

- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns

What should be happening/states to be achieved:
- The organisation provides employees with adequate and achievable demands in relation to the agreed hours of work
- People's skills and abilities are matched to the job demands
- Jobs are designed to be within the capabilities of employees
- Employees' concerns about their work environment are addressed

CONTROL

How much say the person has in the way they do their work

The standard is that:
- Employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns

What should be happening/states to be achieved:
- Where possible, employees have control over their pace of work
- Employees are encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work
- Where possible, employees are encouraged to develop new skills to help them undertake new and challenging pieces of work
- The organisation encourages employees to develop their skills
- Employees have a say over when breaks can be taken
- Employees are consulted over their work patterns

SUPPORT

Includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues

The standard is that:
- Employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns

What should be happening/states to be achieved:
- The organisation has policies and procedures to adequately support employees
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to support their staff
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to support their colleagues
- Employees know what support is available and how and when to access it
- Employees know how to access the required resources to do their job
- Employees receive regular and constructive feedback

RELATIONSHIPS

Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour

The standard is that:
- Employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours, e.g. bullying at work
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns

What should be happening/states to be achieved:
- The organisation promotes positive behaviours at work to avoid conflict and ensure fairness
- Employees share information relevant to their work
- The organisation has agreed policies and procedures to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to report unacceptable behaviour

ROLE

Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles

The standard is that:
- Employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns

What should be happening/states to be achieved:
- The organisation ensures that, as far as possible, the different requirements it places upon employees are compatible
- The organisation provides information to enable employees to understand their role and responsibilities
- The organisation ensures that, as far as possible, the requirements it places upon employees are clear

- Systems are in place to enable employees to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities

CHANGE

How organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation

The standard is that:
- Employees indicate that the organisation engages them frequently when undergoing an organisational change
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns

What should be happening/states to be achieved:
- The organisation provides employees with timely information to enable them to understand the reasons for proposed changes
- The organisation ensures adequate employee consultation on changes and provides opportunities for employees to influence proposals
- Employees are aware of the probable impact of any changes to their jobs. If necessary, employees are given training to support any changes in their jobs
- Employees are aware of timetables for changes
- Employees have access to relevant support during changes

Stress Prevention

Managers must be vigilant towards staff who may show signs of stress and every effort made to identify such signs at an early stage and immediate supportive action taken to prevent the situation continuing or worsening.

Stress prevention and management interventions in the workplace can be broken down into three broad groups:

- *Primary Interventions* attempt to eliminate the sources of stress by, for example, implementing our stress management policy, undertaking stress risk assessments etc

- *Secondary Interventions* set out to improve the overall situation in the workplace by implementing the recommendations identified in any risk assessment e.g. raising awareness of stress issues, job competency training, setting up staff communication groups

- *Tertiary Interventions* deal with the treatment and rehabilitation of those individuals who have suffered ill health as a result of stress e.g. Occupational Health advice, access to the staff counselling network.

Risk Assessment

Suitable and sufficient risk assessments are an effective method of preventing harm to employees arising from work-related stress. They are an on-going process and should be continuously monitored. Managers have a key role to play in assessing the risk of stress within their teams and to identify, prioritise and implement any necessary steps to control any risk identified. The risk assessment procedure (Appendices B and C of the '*Stress Management Policy' - click link*) is the primary tool for achieving this and all managers should ensure these assessments are undertaken, monitored and reviewed regularly.

Managers are ideally placed to monitor local conditions and should take a lead role in discussing stress within team meetings and in supervision. Staff should be encouraged to participate in the risk assessment process to identify work factors that may give rise to stress.

Work-Related Stressors

Lists of potential stressors are set out below and each of these should be considered by managers undertaking work-related stress prevention risk assessments. Each stressor is set within the six key areas that have been identified as likely to give rise to stress, namely, work demands; control; relationships and social support; organisational change; employee role; and individual training and support.

Failures in any of these key areas can give rise to an adverse culture that fails to acknowledge the seriousness of work related stress and associated ill health issues and fails to respond appropriately to identified concerns.

Following on from each list of stressors are possible measures which can be considered in relation to controlling the stressors (please note these lists are not exhaustive and the most effective control strategy will reflect local circumstances)

Potential Stressors

1. DEMANDS

includes issues like workload, work patterns and the work environment

- Essentially there are two identified forms of work overload, qualitative or quantitative and may be characterised by conflicting demands or roles. Quantitative overload is simply having too much work to do in the time available. Qualitative overload is work beyond the capability of the employee, due either to a lack of appropriate training or the individual's intellectual or physical capacity

- Work overload occurs when an employee is allocated work without the necessary resources, in terms of time, individual ability, staff shortages or physical capacity

DEMAND - Capability and Capacity

- The Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999 requires that:

> *"When allocating work to employees, employers should ensure that the demands of the job do not exceed their employees' ability to carry out the work without risk to, themselves or others. Employers should review their employees' capabilities to carry out their work, as necessary"*

DEMAND - Work Under load

- Work related stress can arise when an employee is not sufficiently challenged by the work. Under load is

normally associated with routine and under-stimulating work, often relating to repetitive tasks and can result in employees feeling dissatisfied or under utilised

DEMAND - Physical Environment

- The degree to which employees are affected by their physical environment depends greatly on where they are working and the nature of the work. This could include factors such as temperature, humidity, noise, ventilation, the quality and arrangement of offices and workstations, interruptions etc.
- Poor environmental conditions can result in both physical and

psychological effects such as fatigue, headaches, irritability or reduced ability to concentrate

DEMAND - Occupational

- The very nature of some jobs is such that employees, particularly those undertaking "front line" and often challenging work, may be exposed aggressive and abusive behaviour, or even physical assault during the course of their duties
- The affect of such exposure varies between individuals, according to their level of experience, training, the type of supervision and the degree to which they feel threatened or anxious by an incident

Example

Two employees work doing the same job as part of a small team. When a new manager arrives one of the employees is given the more difficult work, while the other is given the more routine repetitive tasks.

The employee with the challenging work begins to work longer hours in order to get his work completed on time. After a few weeks he is frequently off sick due to the pressure of work.

The other employee does the routine work easily and has time left with nothing to do. She soon feels bored and starts to make mistakes and not complete tasks due to lack of motivation.

The manager holds a meeting with the employees to discuss the problems. The manager agrees to look at the job design and reorganise work duties. Training is arranged so that both employees can undertake some of the more challenging work and the routine work is distributed more fairly.

Potential Control Measures

- *Consider the allocation of workloads* and ensure there are sufficient resources to undertake the work or that staff are not underemployed. Remember that each individual is different and only by talking to employees can you get the balance right between challenging demands and stressful demands. Also circumstances change, at work and at home, so you need to maintain communication
- *If adequate resources are not available,* ensure you give guidance to staff as to the priorities at an early stage
- *Provide positive support for staff* by assisting them to plan, prioritise or where necessary, renegotiate time scales in relation to their workload
- *Assess and consider adjustment of priorities* or where possible arrange workload cover, during periods of staff absence
- *Assess and be aware of the individual strengths and weaknesses* of the team and ensure that staff are adequately trained to carry out their work

Potential Stressors

2. CONTROL

how much say a person has in the way they do their work

- If employees are to perform well it is desirable for them to have control over elements of how and when their job is done. A lack of control over their working life is one of the most common causes of stress for employees and can lead to disaffection, alienation and poor performance

Example

A new manager is concerned about one of her teams. Their level of performance is not as good as other teams and they seem poorly motivated.

She speaks to the team leader who says the team doesn't really feel as though they are fully included in what is going on. The manager decides to hold a 'clear the air' meeting with the team and they have an ideas session in which they try to identify the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities facing the team. It is clear that the team would like to be more involved.

The manager suggests a weekly half hour meeting at which plans and work can be discussed and questions raised. A whiteboard is installed outside the meeting room so that items or problems can be written down by team members as they occur.

The new meetings are not an instant success but the manager makes sure that useful information is provided and questions are always answered. Gradually team members are more forthcoming and the meetings become an integral part of the weekly routine. The manager notices an improvement in morale and a number of suggestions made by staff at the meetings are successfully implemented.

Potential Control Measures

- *Create every opportunity for staff to plan* their own work and to participate in collective team decisions in relation to how objectives should be met and the development of problem solving strategies. Employees who are involved in making decisions often generate better ideas. It makes the most of people's talents and, by increasing motivation, can reduce stress and improve performance
- *Meetings of any kind,* whether between individuals, teams or larger groups, are very important because they give staff and managers the chance to exchange ideas and discuss projects face to face. Smaller meetings are useful for discussing the work of a particular group and should give plenty of opportunity for employees to contribute. Larger meetings are often used to present information to a large number of employees at once but provide limited chance for employees to respond
- *Ensure staff have a clear understanding of the contribution* their work makes to the organisational objectives and give positive feedback, which recognises both their value and skill
- *A culture of trust in staff* professionalism should be encouraged where staff performance may be assessed in the course of normal supervision. Supervision meetings should provide constructive and positive support for staff and is a means to ensure that staff are coping

Potential Stressors

3. RELATIONSHIPS

includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour

- Human beings are genetically programmed to interact with their fellows in mutually supportive groups and this instinctive quality provides a framework of 'social support' which can represent a significant stress control or prevention factor
- Because of this interaction, employee 'relationships' within the work place can have an important positive or negative affect, depending on the culture and nature of individual personalities, which may either be supportive or a source of potential conflict
- Given the importance of these 'social 'influences, the working relationship between managers, peers and subordinates can have a dramatic affect on individual staff members of a team and if the culture is dysfunctional, conflict and work-related stress will increase
- Such a dysfunctional culture can be created by the inappropriate actions of managers or individuals within the team, who may resort to bullying or harassment of either individuals or teams
- Bullying and harassment are particular aspects of workplace relationships that can have extremely damaging affects on employees, and may lead to severe levels of work-related stress
- *The 'Dignity at Work Policy' - click link* contains advice and guidance on harassment and bullying
- Managers cannot always control relationships, personality clashes will occur and employers and employees often have very personal reasons for preferring to work with one person rather than another. However, employers can be pro-active in helping to encourage relationships based on good behaviour and respect

- Some of the most frequent problems between individuals at work arise because employers don't have clear rules and policies on dealing with grievances and disciplinary issues.

These help to set boundaries and promote awareness of equal opportunities and diversity

Example

An employee was frequently late for work. This created more work for others who had to cover for her. The manager spoke to the employee on a number of occasions but things did not improve. The other employees were annoyed and thought the late employee was getting away with blue murder.

The manager called the employee to a formal disciplinary meeting and informed the employee of her right to be accompanied. At the meeting the employee was unable to give a satisfactory reason for lateness, saying she kept forgetting to set her alarm. The manager issued a formal written warning and told the employee that if the late arrivals continued she would be given a final written warning.

The warning demonstrated to the employee the seriousness of the situation and her time keeping improved to a good standard. The other employees were happy that firm action had been taken and this improved working relationships all round

Potential Control Measures

- *Ensure,* by working in partnership with staff and by communicating the *'Dignity at Work Policy' - click link*, that any form of bullying or harassment is not permitted. Should any instance arise, the matter must be dealt with quickly and effectively in line with the relevant policies and if necessary using current disciplinary or grievance procedures
- *Staff should be encouraged* to recognise the value and contribution of their colleagues and to promote a culture of trust and dignity within which all individuals feel comfortable

Potential Stressors

4. CHANGE

how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated

- Change is one of the more obvious causes of stress. It alters routines and can make personnel uncertain about their futures. It can mean upheaval, with the threat of possible re-location and redundancy, or a minor re-adjustment like a new office layout
- Significant organisational changes often give employees cause for concern in relation to feelings of insecurity and anxiety resulting from reviews and changes in established work practice or a fear that new objectives may not be achievable.This is particularly true if organisational change is poorly managed and can increase levels of work-related stress
- On going change and reviews affecting work patterns and objectives can also affect employee motivation and morale, creating work- related stress

Example

A new computer system was introduced to an organisation. A training programme was developed for staff on all the new software commonly used in the organisation. Once the software had been in use for a while a manager noticed that the one of his employees had become quiet and uncommunicative.

The manager spoke to the employee and asked him about possible problems that may be affecting performance. The employee said he hadn't got to grips with the new software but on discussion it turned out that he had particular difficulties with special applications that only he and a few others were required to use. These applications hadn't been covered in the training. The employee hadn't wished to make a fuss as he felt he was just being a bit slower than the others to pick things up.

Further training was provided for the employee and other employees that used the special applications. This resolved the problem

Potential Control Measures

- *Where significant change is occurring,* ensure staff are fully informed and provided with clear easily understood action plans and timetables. As part of this process identify, with staff, how the change will affect normal work activity, job roles and any training or development needs that may be required

- *Seek guidance* from the *'Managing Change Toolkit' - click link*

- *In order to avoid rumour* and unnecessary staff anxiety, new strategies or planned developments should be communicated quickly to allow staff an opportunity to ask questions and discuss. Managers should have an 'open door' policy to encourage staff input in relation to either their concerns or suggestions for improvement

- *Provide consistent support* for staff throughout periods of change.

- *Following significant organisational changes* managers should consider the impact of revised objectives and ensure staff are clear regarding their individual roles

- *Existing risk assessments* must be revised to address any changes that may increase levels of work-related stress to staff, particularly if this results in relocation within new social groups or in working with completely different people

- *Any staff subject to redundancy* due to organisational change must be provided with all means of support

Potential Stressors

5. ROLE

whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles

- There are two key stressors associated with the role of an employee within the organisation that of 'role conflict' and 'role ambiguity', both of which have clear links with the individual's capabilities
- Role conflict relates to an employees' inability to manage conflicting aspects of the work which are perceived to be incompatible either in terms of the desired outcomes or are outside the individual's personal skills or ability
- These aspects may also be elements of work that the employee does not want to do or are not perceived to be part of their job
- Such conflict often causes employees to portray different roles or patterns of behaviour according to the perceptions of other colleagues who may interpret their job requirements differently
- Role ambiguity arises when individuals are unclear as to the scope and responsibilities of their job or the associated key work objectives. There may also be uncertainty as to the employees' responsibilities and the expectations of their colleagues. This ambiguity can arise from a lack of adequate information or supervision from a line manager or due to work practice changes being made without an appropriate review of the job description and provision of suitable training
- Other examples of role ambiguity arise from situations such as taking up a new job, a promotion or transfer, moving to another team with new colleagues and line manager, or simply having to adapt to changes within the existing organisational structure

Example

A new member of staff joins a busy team. He receives off the job training and then joins his new colleagues in the team. There is no formal induction process and he is expected to pick things up as he goes along.

He soon realises there are a lot of things he doesn't know so he asks colleagues but they are very busy and can't spend much time explaining things. He has to make some photocopies and rather than ask for help again decides to just go ahead. Half way through the photocopying a supervisor berates him for using an expensive colour photocopier for standard document copy records. Later the same day he discovers that he has used the wrong computer application to save records and the work has to be redone.

The new employee becomes increasingly demoralised as similar mistakes occur on following days. At the end of the week he decides the work is not for him and hands in his notice.

The company had wasted the expensive training and a potentially good employee because of the lack of help they gave him to settle in

Potential Control Measures

- *The employment relationship* between an employee and their work starts with the selection process. However, the future of that relationship depends to a large extent on how the new employee settles into the job. Therefore, a robust induction process must be implemented for all new staff
- *Managers must oversee the induction training* of all new staff to ensure that all aspects have been delivered effectively and the individual is properly equipped with the necessary skills to undertake their responsibilities
- *An employee's job description should be accurate* and kept up to date with any changes. It should include the main purpose, the main tasks and the scope of the job
- *Managers should use the staff appraisal procedures* to ensure staff have a clearly defined role which enables them to understand exactly what their responsibilities are
- *Take time in normal supervision to talk to staff* about how they perceive their role and as a means to regularly monitor common understanding of what is expected of them and what they in turn can expect from their manager
- *Change has be dealt with* above but managers should remember that it can have a huge impact on the way an individual is expected to do their job
- *During change managers need to review work plans* and objectives to ensure they are still relevant. This also applies if new members of staff have joined or new teams have been created or merged with each other

Potential Stressors

6. SUPPORT

includes the
encouragement,
sponsorship and
resources provided
by the organisation,
line management and
colleagues

- In order to undertake any role and to successfully discharge their responsibilities all employees require the necessary competence. It is therefore essential that staff receive appropriate training to properly equip them with the necessary skills so that they feel comfortable and personally confident within their individual role

- If employees are not properly trained and provided with the required competencies, their performance will be below standard, giving rise to feelings of inadequacy or being pressurised which will increase their level of work-related stress

- Where a new strategy, or changes to existing work practice are introduced, proper consideration should be given to ensuring that objectives can be met using existing staff competencies or that they can be developed appropriately in the short term. Failure to do so will again impose additional work-related stress on the employee.

- Often employees are subject to external stress factors which can impact on their working life and such times of crisis should be dealt with sensitively, providing the individual with any necessary additional support. This can be a most effective means of reducing or moderating work-related stress, which tends to increase at times when staff experience personal difficulties

- Negative, unsupportive, or inappropriately critical management input has the effect of raising an employees' anxiety, undermining confidence, which in turn affects morale and, if an integral part of the culture, can significantly impact on the stress levels of both an individual and a team

- It is important to take account of the individual differences of team members as some may thrive on meeting tight deadlines whilst others perform better when not working within defined, time limited plans. These differences if ignored can lead to interpersonal conflict and create a dysfunctional group, increasing greatly the degree of work related stress

Example

Managers had noticed that incidences of short term absence had risen and that there were more petty disagreements between staff. An independent survey was carried out which revealed that staff felt poorly informed about company prospects and rumours of job cuts were circulating. Many staff pointed to the fact that the once regular staff meetings had not been held for some months.

Managers acted by holding a company wide meeting at which the healthy state of order book was revealed and the job cut rumours dispelled. At the same time volunteers were called for to help set up a small management/worker group to look at how communications could be improved.

Following two meetings of the group regular staff meetings were re-introduced with an assurance that they wouldn't be cancelled. At the same time a small permanent consultative group was set up at which management plans could be discussed and worker views taken into account. At the first meeting of the group problems of stress were aired and the company agreed to provide access for employees to a confidential counselling service.

The new communications and consultation arrangements worked well and helped develop higher levels of trust between managers and employees. Absence levels have also fallen

Potential Control Measures

- *Provide support and encouragement to staff.* Ensure that criticism is constructive and offered with a view to improvement rather than to in any way demean the individual
- *Through supervision* always encourage staff to put forward their views or raise their concerns within a participative framework where problems can be identified and solutions agreed collectively. Refer to the *'appraisal standards and guidance' - click link* for further assistance
- *Individual meetings with staff* can also be used to try and identify any personal problems which could include money worries, illness, bereavement, family problems etc

- *By being supportive,* Individuals will be more willing to admit that they are suffering from stress because they can expect to be dealt with sympathetically.
- *Encourage access to the Staff Counselling Network* whether problems are work-related or personal
- *The sorts of issues* causing work-related stress can be added to the agenda of team meetings and therefore be discussed regularly
- *All staff must be provided with suitable and sufficient training* to do their jobs, particularly new staff for which a proper induction training programme is essential, commencing on their first day
- *Managers must promote a culture that values diversity* and ensure that any form of discrimination is dealt with promptly and effectively
- *Managers should ensure staff take their annual leave entitlement* and that they take appropriate rest and meal breaks during the course of their working day.
- *Managers should encourage* staff to adopt a healthy 'work-life balance'

Managing Stress Related Absence

Managers must be familiar with the Stress Management Flowchart which can be found on the last page of the *'Stress Management Policy' - click link* document"

Should a member of staff be off work due to stress it is important to manage their return to work, whether or not it was related to work. The manager must:

- *Plan the employee's return to work with them*. If necessary advice should be sought from the relevant Personnel Officer or the Occupational Health Adviser

- *Ensure* that when an employee returns to work they are not subject to the same pressures that could have contributed to their absence in the first place, unless additional support/safeguards are put in place
- *Complete a risk assessment,* take any necessary actions and issue a copy to the employee, put a copy in the employee's personal file and, if agreed by the employee, issue a copy to any Trade Union Representative.
- *Consider a phased return,* for up to a maximum of four weeks, during which there should be a gradual increase in working towards normal hours. Manager should also consider other flexible working options.
  Full details are given in the *'Lifewise Policy' - click link*. A person may be ready to return to some aspects of their job but not others and workload responsibilities may need to be adjusted accordingly
- *After returning to work,* continue to provide support to help the employee's full recovery. Meetings with the employee may need to be planned more frequently than would be usual under normal supervision arrangements.
- *Consider other options* and take urgent advice from the relevant Personnel Officer or the Occupational Health Adviser if the employee continues to experience difficulties in managing pressures at work and particularly if as a result the employee is absent from work again.