

Occupational Stress Policy

We want to help protect the health, welfare and productivity of employees and recognise that occupational stress is a health and safety issue. In doing so, we acknowledge the importance of identifying and reducing workplace stressors. We will not dismiss stress as an issue nor should individuals feel they are weak or have no place in the organisation if they cannot cope with excessive stress.

This policy applies to everyone in the FCO and provides guidance about recognising stress in ourselves and in others. As individuals, we all have a responsibility in reducing our own stress and to avoid any temptation to perceive ourselves as "victims". Managers are also responsible in carrying out their duty of care to staff for whom they are responsible. HR is responsible for providing the necessary resources.

1. What is Stress?

If you feel that you are suffering from stress, you probably feel under pressure from factors outside your personal control. The Health and Safety Executive define stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them". This makes an important distinction between pressure, which can be a positive state if managed correctly and stress which can be detrimental to health. Working for the FCO can be stressful. It is a fact of life in a very busy organisation in which we are constantly reacting to unforeseen demands and situations. So, we cannot expect to remove stress entirely from our working life. Evidence indicates that a controlled amount of pressure is actually good for us - it makes us work better as it promotes motivation, stimulation and productivity. What we want to achieve therefore is an optimum level of pressure.

Stress-related problems are rarely confined solely to the individual concerned: their effects will be felt by all around, through impaired relationships with colleagues, increased workload due to the need to cover for absence or as a result of increased turnover of staff. Managers may spend more time coping with the effects of an individual's stress than they would have spent taking action to avoid or mitigate stress.

The willingness of managers to give up half an hour of their time to listen to an individual's concerns is an investment if it means keeping him/her functioning at work and feeling supported instead of carrying a gap because that person is off sick.

2 . Symptoms of Stress

Some of the more common symptoms of stress that may be evident in the workplace are listed below. This is by no means a diagnostic tool but should help you to recognise stress in yourself and others. It is not unusual to suffer from several symptoms at the same time.

Physical and Work Performance Symptoms

- Gastric problems e.g. indigestion, ulcers
- Extended lunch breaks
- Headaches
- Socially withdrawn
- Heart palpitations
- Tiredness
- Skin complaints e.g. eczema
- Uncharacteristic errors
- High blood pressure
- Forgetfulness
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)
- Working longer hours
- Tiredness
- Increased short-term sickness absence
- Frequent colds, flu or other infections
- Arriving late/leaving early
- Lack of motivation
- Low productivity
- Behaviour
- Emotional/Aggressive/Negative
- Feeling Low
- Bullying
- Increased use of stimulants

Tearful/Argumentative/Belligerence
Low self-esteem
Swearing/shouting
Lack of, or inappropriate, humour
Irritable
Refusal to listen or respond to advice/requests
Sulking
Anxious

3 . Common Stressors (causes of Stress)

a) In the workplace

- too much to do
- not enough to do
- worries about change
- responsibility but without the proportionate power
- personality clashes
- concerns about career development/postings
- not feeling "included" or "involved"
- concerns about work performance/appraisals
- environmental factors during overseas postings

b) Change in the workplace

The process involved with change and the uncertainty this can bring can create stress in individuals. The FCO is going through a considerable period of change at present in order to meet the ever-increasing demands with which we are faced as an organisation.

It may be difficult to see how stress can be avoided when it results from externally imposed change, but we can usually control how change is actually managed.

The effects on staff should be a major consideration when planning change. It is therefore important to consider the likely impact of change on staff and to encourage a dialogue at all levels. The objectives and expectations of change should be set and communicated to staff at an early stage and feedback should be sought from staff in order to involve them in the process. Communication is crucial in the change process. It is important to spread the impact of change and consider delay or reconsider further changes if they are likely to result in stress.

c) Home life

Staff may suffer from stress because of stressors outside as well as inside the workplace. If staff have particular stressors at home, they will inevitably be less able to cope with stressors at work. Individuals need to recognise this and be prepared to tell their managers what is happening for them outside work. Equally, managers need to respond sympathetically and to recognise increased vulnerability in those staff who have stressors at home.

Stressors outside the workplace may include:

- Relationship difficulties including marital breakdown
- Family illness
- Financial problems
- Moving home
- Bereavement
- Commuting to/from work
- "Goldfish bowl" effect of compound living overseas
- Geographical separation from family and friends
- Adapting to cultural and physical demands of country of posting

4. Responsibilities of Individuals/Managers

a) Individuals' Responsibilities

- Learn to recognise the symptoms as set out above and do something about them.
- Discuss work-related stress factors with your line manager. Remember that managers cannot take action to try and help you if they do not know you have a problem. If it helps to set the issues out beforehand in writing then do so. Explain how you are feeling, what factors you feel are creating stress for you and suggest what would help you.

- If you feel unable to do so, or talking to your manager has not resolved matters or if you find it difficult to pinpoint what is causing you stress, contact the Employee Assistance Programme on a confidential basis. Your Union Rep can help you plan the approach to your manager.
- Remember that getting angry or using verbal or physical aggression will not get you what you want and will definitely make things worse for you.
- Ensure managers are aware if you are suffering from stress outside the workplace.
- Provide constructive feedback on changes in the workplace.
- Be alert to the possibility that your line manager may be adversely affected by stress. Be prepared to refer upwards as necessary.
- Take care of your health by getting enough sleep, exercising regularly and eating a healthy diet. This will help you to cope better with demands at work.
- Ensure your alcohol intake is within recommended limits.
- Ensure you take a proper lunch break every day, ideally including some time spent outdoors otherwise your concentration is likely to be affected mid-afternoon.
- Do not burn yourself out – make time for relaxation and consider learning relaxation skills, e.g. deep breathing.
- Plan things to do in your spare time. It helps to have things to look forward to, for example – meeting friends, arranging a day out or even booking a holiday.
- Support your colleagues if they are suffering from stress and encourage them to contact their Union Rep or the EAP as appropriate.
- Familiarise yourself with the guidance provided on the intranet about bullying and harassment.
- Consult your GP if you are worried about your health.
- Be proactive in dealing with your stress rather than worrying about things.

b) Managers' responsibilities

- Learn to recognise the symptoms of stress in staff and take appropriate action
- Listen to staff with an open mind and respect. Remember to also respect confidentiality.
- Encourage staff to discuss stress symptoms constructively.
- Encourage staff to seek medical advice from their GP where appropriate, e.g. to rule out any underlying health condition for persistent physical symptoms. Notify HR-HW if/when an officer is signed off sick with stress for 3 weeks or more.
- Ensure good communication between management and staff, particularly when there are organisational or procedural changes.
- Ensure staff are fully trained to carry out their specific jobs.
- Monitor working hours to ensure that staff are not consistently working long hours.
- Encourage staff to seek support and advice from the Employee Assistance Programme.
- Offer additional support to staff if they are experiencing stress outside work, e.g. bereavement, relationship breakdown.
- Consider whether you should make yourself more available to staff. If staff grow accustomed to seeing you on a more informal basis, they will feel able to approach you with their concerns.
- Try not to give unconscious messages – for example, senior managers may work long hours but that does not mean that more junior staff (who do not have the same remuneration) should have to do so.

- Be alert to subtle forms of pressure, e.g. remarks made about people leaving the office at 4pm when they work flexible hours.

* HRD - Health and Welfare Responsibilities

- Support individuals who are on sick leave for stress related illness and ensure they and their managers are provided with appropriate occupational health advice for the individual's return to work.

- Encourage individuals to contact the Employee Assistance programme for professional counselling where appropriate.