

Proactive Stress Management Steps

Amendment record

This Annex has been reviewed by Directorate of Defence Safety (DDS) together with relevant subject matter experts and key safety stakeholders. Any suggestions for amendments to this chapter **should** in the first instance be directed to the Defence organisation's [Safety Centre/Team Group Mailbox](mailto:People-DDS-GroupMailbox@mod.gov.uk) and with their approval, sent to DDS at: People-DDS-GroupMailbox@mod.gov.uk.

Version No	Date of publication	Text Affected	Authority
1.2	Oct 20	Interim update post-handover of Policy from DSA to D HS&EP.	D HS&EP
1.3	24 Mar 25	Release of two-part chapter structure. Inclusion of Mental Health Fitness; the Institute of Naval Medicine process for utilising the MODified Stress Indicator Tool and more proactive measures for dealing with work-related stress.	DDS
1.4	11 Nov 25	Revision to Annex A to include possible alternatives to the MODified Stress Survey, addition of Annex D - Assurance checklist and separated annexes from the main policy.	DDS

Introduction

1. Defence encourages the use of a simple, evidence-based 4-step approach to proactively identify and manage work-related stress. This approach can be utilised across Defence at different levels. An overview those 4-steps are:

- a. **Step 1 – Awareness.** This first step helps personnel to proactively develop an understanding of the risks associated with work-related stress and the HSE Stress Management Standards.
- b. **Step 2 – Prevention.** Personnel **should** periodically complete the MOD Form 5001: Individual Assessment and Stress Reduction Tool, to identify potential sources of stress and develop potential control measures or solutions. Regularly completing the Individual Assessment and Stress Reduction Tool can help personnel to benchmark and recognise changes to proactively manage stress.
- c. **Step 3 – Supportive Monitoring.** This is for personnel to actively support themselves (or for commanders / managers to support those they manage) to maintain stress levels within a healthy range and contribute to a team culture where work-related stress can be openly discussed. Supportive monitoring is about making sure there is collective consent and cooperation across colleagues in order to create a psychologically safe working environment. Where stress is identified through the Individual Assessment and Stress Reduction Tool, the person and their commander / manager (or suitable alternative such as a mentor) can work together to develop an Individual Stress Reduction Action Plan.

d. **Step 4 – Reviewing.** This last step assists personnel (and their commanders / managers) to proactively, and regularly, reflect on and review any plans to reduce or eliminate stress.

Step 1 - Awareness

2. Awareness of how stress affects people is a large part of the foundation for how Defence can proactively manage it. Additionally, being actively aware of the main overarching causes of work-related stress¹ can help senior leaders, accountable persons, commanders and managers manage it and support personnel. The management standards are:

- a. **Demands** – the demands of the role.
- b. **Control** – how much control personnel have over how they work.
- c. **Support** – received from commanders or managers and colleagues.
- d. **Relationships** – with others at work.
- e. **Role** – how clearly understood their role is.
- f. **Change** – how organisational change (regardless of size and scope) is managed and communicated in Defence.
- g. **Work-life balance.**

3. Stress affects people in different ways at different times and is often the result of a combination of factors in their personal and working lives. Work-related stress arises where the combination of pressure from workload, working practices, work relationships, and so on, exceeds the persons capacity and capability to cope resiliently, resulting in adverse physical and / or mental reactions.

4. Whilst the MOD has no direct control over external or personal factors, it is committed to manage those risks factors which are within its control to minimise their impact, where possible.

5. If excessive stress persists, physical harm may occur when the body tries to adapt to the pressures placed upon it. As the body's resources are depleted and it is unable to maintain normal function, physical symptoms may appear (sweating, raised heart rate and so on); long term damage may result as the body and the immune system become exhausted.

6. Stress may manifest itself in a number of different ways, affecting how a person feels, or coming out in more physical or behavioural ways as detailed from www.mind.org.uk.

7. How stress can make you feel:

- a. Irritable, angry, impatient or wound up

¹ According to the Health and Safety Executive Stress Management Standards - [What are the Management Standards? - Stress - HSE](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/)

- b. Over-burdened or overwhelmed
- c. Anxious, nervous or afraid
- d. Like your thoughts are racing and you can't switch off
- e. Unable to enjoy yourself
- f. Depressed
- g. Uninterested in life
- h. Like you've lost your sense of humour
- i. A sense of dread
- j. Worried or tense
- k. Neglected or lonely
- l. Existing mental health problems getting worse

Note: If someone is feeling depressed, overly anxious or uninterested in life, this may constitute a mental health emergency.

8. Physical signs of stress:

- a. Difficulty breathing
- b. Panic attacks
- c. Blurred eyesight or sore eyes
- d. Sleep problems
- e. Fatigue
- f. Muscle aches and headaches
- g. Chest pains and high blood pressure
- h. Indigestion or heartburn
- i. Constipation or diarrhoea
- j. Feeling sick, dizzy or fainting
- k. Sudden weight gain or weight loss
- l. Developing rashes or itchy skin
- m. Sweating
- n. Changes to your period or menstrual cycle
- o. Existing physical health problems getting worse

Note: If someone is experiencing some of the more severe signs of stress, such as chest pains, panic attacks or feeling sick, dizzy or fainting, this may constitute a mental health emergency.

9. Behavioural signs of stress:

- a. Find it hard to make decisions
- b. Unable to concentrate
- c. Unable to remember things, or make your memory feel slower than usual
- d. Constantly worry or have feelings of dread
- e. Snap at people
- f. Bite your nails
- g. Pick at or itch your skin
- h. Grind your teeth or clench your jaw
- i. Experience sexual problems, such as losing interest in sex or being unable to enjoy sex
- j. Eat too much or too little
- k. Smoke or drink alcohol more than you usually would
- l. Restless, like you can't sit still
- m. Cry or feel tearful
- n. Spend or shop too much
- o. Not exercise as much as you usually would, or exercise too much
- p. Withdraw from people around you

Note: Increased alcohol consumption, especially if it affects work performance or constant feelings of dread may constitute a mental health emergency.

Note: Many of the above signs are not possible to be picked up in work and can be a very private, individual matter. The above lists are detailed for fullness and for personnel to see what might be affecting them.

10. Mental health emergencies are very individual and can be very hard to spot in some people. If you suspect that you or someone you work with is dealing with a mental health emergency, follow your local and / or Defence organisation processes and procedures.

Step 2 - Prevention

11. This stage is key for all personnel at any level of Defence, regardless of rank, grade or management responsibilities. It **should** be applied at all levels of Defence and using the different tools that Defence provides – primarily the INM MODified Stress Indicator Survey (detailed at [Annex A](#)) and the Individual Assessment and Stress Reduction Tool.

12. Senior leaders and accountable persons **should** make use of the MODified Stress Indicator Survey by following the process in [Annex A](#) and creating a workable and achievable action plan to combat the causes of work-related stress, that has been thoroughly consulted on.

13. Consulted groups **should** include those with protected characteristics under the [Equality Act 2010](#), Trade Unions (where applicable), Mental Health Fitness Representatives (MHFRs), HR personnel, Health and Safety responsible persons, and any other personnel who expresses an interest in being consulted upon.

14. In addition to the MODified Stress Indicator Survey, senior leaders and accountable persons **should** make sure that all personnel in their area(s) of responsibility are aware of the Individual Assessment and Stress Reduction Tool, and to communicate its usefulness in individual management of work-related stress.

15. Commanders and / or managers **should** make sure that the personnel they manage are aware of the Individual Assessment and Stress Reduction Tool and how its use can proactively help to manage and prevent stress from becoming an issue.

16. Commanders and / or managers **should** work with personnel who approach them to help develop an action plan following individuals completing the Individual Assessment and Stress Reduction Tool.

Note: Commanders and / or managers might not be within the Chain of Command or line management chain of personnel approaching them for this but may be approached as a trusted person who the individual feels comfortable talking to.

17. All personnel **should** make use of and complete the Individual Assessment and Stress Reduction Tool, on a regular basis, regardless of how stressed they are feeling due to working pressures. This is to better track and manage stressors before they become a problem and to try and keep incidents of work-related stress low.

18. Personnel can complete the Individual Assessment and Stress Reduction Tool alone or with a trusted colleague, commander, manager, or any other suitable person (Trade Union Rep, MHFR, HR rep and so on).

Step 3 – Supportive Monitoring

19. Supportive monitoring is about personnel actively supporting themselves and / or the people that they manage to keep stress levels within a healthy range and to create a culture where work-related stress can be openly discussed.

20. Supportive monitoring is also about personnel establishing consent and cooperation with each other so that all personnel can feel psychologically safe when discussing work-related stress and checking in with each other.

21. This step is to broadly align with the legal duty of care² that employers (MOD) have towards their employees (all personnel, Military and Civilian personnel) and is of particular importance for commanders and managers, as they have the most direct role in supporting personnel across their teams.

22. If stress is identified within work through the Individual Assessment and Stress Reduction Tool, personnel **should** discuss this with their commander or manager (or another commander or manager, colleague, HR / TU Rep and so on if it is more comfortable for the individual). The goal is to jointly use the Individual Assessment and Stress Reduction Tool to create a personalised Stress Action and Review Plan. This is to give both the individual and commander/manager a structure for deciding specific actions to reduce the likelihood of stress occurring and minimizing the level of stress experienced. Personnel can also request a colleague, MHFR or suitable HR / Trade Union rep to be present when completing this plan with their commander or manager.

23. A personalised Stress Action and Review Plan **should** enable personnel and their commander or manager to identify causes of work-related stress, explore solutions and review the effectiveness of any agreed control measures in reducing any identified workplace stressors.

Step 4 – Reviewing

24. This step is about reflecting on and reviewing the plans which have been put in place between personnel and commanders or managers, and making sure that MOD resources are utilised effectively when work-related stress does occur. Making sure that plans are reviewed helps to assure Defence's ongoing legal obligations to manage work-related risks to health and wellbeing.

25. Commanders and managers have a significant role in making sure that psychological health and wellbeing is considered a priority among personnel – in the same way that physical health and safety **should** be.

26. In practice this means commanders and managers prioritising creating a safe, open working environment where personnel feel able to speak up and seek support if they are noticing their stress levels rising or are already feeling stressed.

27. Commanders and managers are not expected to diagnose or treat work-related stress and are not expected to be experts. However, commanders and managers **should** take any reports of work-related stress seriously and take actions to reduce the psychological harm of their team members. Making sure to listen to the individual who is experiencing high stress levels is vital in being able to understand what is causing the stress and what appropriate actions may be to remove or reduce it.

28. The Individual Assessment and Stress Reduction Tool is a living document. Personnel, in conjunction with the commander or manager that they set it up with, **should** book in regular joint review dates (along with a colleague, MHFR or suitable Welfare /

² [Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974, Section 2\(1\)](#) – “It shall be the duty of every employer to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the **health, safety and welfare** at work of all his employees.”

Trade Union rep if applicable) to consider what is and isn't working. Additionally, stressors may need to be added or removed as working situations evolve.

29. All reviews **should** be recorded on the Individual Assessment and Stress Reduction Tool, with a new version completed once all review rows have been exhausted. Both the individual and relevant commander or manager **should** have access to a copy of the agreed Individual Assessment and Stress Reduction Tool (specifically the Stress Action and Review Plan).