



# Managing Workplace Stress

*A guide for oil industry  
managers and supervisors*



#### ***Acknowledgements***

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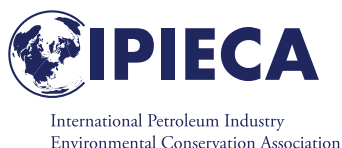
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# Introduction

## Purpose of this Guide

This Guide is designed to help oil industry managers and supervisors understand, recognize, and deal effectively with stress in the workplace. It aims to encourage and enable an holistic approach to the management of workplace stress, with a focus on prevention. The Guide is designed to complement current practice, which tends to focus more on developing employee ability to cope with stress and, when this fails, on treatment options.

This document sets out to:

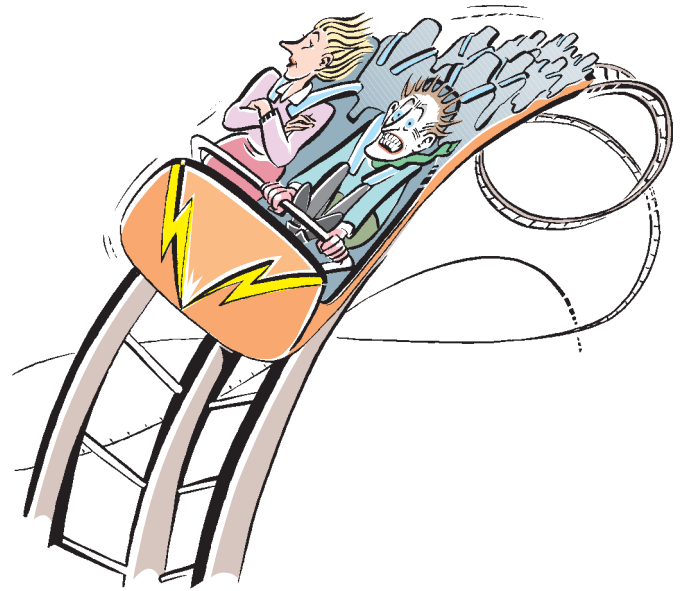
- raise awareness of the causes and effects of excessive stressors;
- encourage and support the use of good practice and preventative measures by supervisors and individuals;
- provide tools and techniques to assess and manage stress within a workgroup; and
- develop an understanding of how to recognize signs of stress in oneself and others, and ensure that appropriate measures are taken, including providing support for individuals.

## Definitions

- ‘Stress’ is commonly used to describe the external exposures, pressures and demands that we face, the coping attempts that we perform to deal with them and the outcomes.

To avoid confusion, the term ‘stress’ will be used as the overall description of the subject while ‘stressor’ and ‘distress’ label causes (exposures, input), and responses and outcomes (effects, outputs), respectively.

- ‘Stressor’ labels pressures, challenges or demands that produce adaption responses and are known to have the potential to cause distress and health problems.
- ‘Distress’ labels negative emotional, behavioural or physical reactions.



## The origins of stress

Stressors are ubiquitous across every facet of our lives. Exposure to stressors can be both work-related and non-work related. It is important to realize that stressors can have a cumulative effect and that simultaneous exposure to multiple stressors without sufficient recovery time can lead to increased vulnerability for an individual.

Stressors are interactive and interdependent and this is an important fact that needs to be recognized. While this document deals with work-related stressors it should be remembered that distress resulting from non-work related causes is quite common and will have an impact in the workplace. Conversely, distress resulting from work-related causes will have an impact outside the work environment.

## Why should stress concern us?

Work-related distress has been shown to affect millions of workers across all types of employment sectors. In some countries it is a mandatory requirement to identify all factors posing a risk to health and well-being at

## Introduction

work, so that measures can be taken at an early stage. Work-related mental illnesses are becoming one of the major causes of occupational illness and work-years lost.

Research has identified a series of work-related stressors that have the potential to alter a person's health, job motivation or commitment to work. Prolonged, excessive exposure to such stressors may lead to:

- an increase in the likelihood or severity of a number of illnesses including:
  - physical illnesses and injuries (for example heart disease, musculoskeletal disorders, gastrointestinal disturbances and various minor illnesses);
  - psychological effects and mental illnesses (for example sleep problems, anxiety and depression);
- increased absenteeism;
- an increase in the frequency of accidents;
- reduced morale;
- increased staff turnover;
- reduced productivity at work or at home.

### Accountability and responsibilities

Promotion of health and safety requires that risks associated with our business which affect the health and safety of employees are assessed and managed. Relative to other health and



safety hazards, occupational stressors and distress seem to be more difficult to assess. Therefore, it is essential that we apply the same rigor in assessing and managing workplace hazards for distress as we do to all health and safety risks.

All parties within an organization should be aware of the need to address potential health-related problems in the workplace:

- **The company** is normally considered to be accountable for taking reasonably practicable actions to reduce risks thus ensuring that work activity does not adversely impact health of staff.
- **Supervisors** are responsible for assisting employees to maintain a healthful work environment. This includes looking at how work is organized, being vigilant to employee vulnerabilities and seeing if there are ways to relieve the pressures so that they

#### Workplace stress—a common health problem

The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has issued reports on self-reported work-related illness in 1998/99, 2001/02 and 2003/04: musculoskeletal disorders and stress were by far the most commonly reported work-related illnesses.

In Asia, studies from Japan and China have found high prevalence of work-related distress.

In the USA, the National Occupational Research Agenda (NORA)—a framework to guide occupational safety and health research into the next decade—has chosen 'organization of work' as one of five prioritized work environment categories.



do not become excessive. In addition it is important to check to see if others are impacted through a change in team dynamics. They should be aware of resources that are available so that employees can be directed towards tools that can assist at an early stage in problem solving.

- **Individuals** are responsible for notifying their supervisor of any shortcomings or issues relating to their own perceived stress or stress observed in others. This requires a partnership between the individual and the supervisor based on honesty and trust. Individuals also should familiarize themselves with available resources and support.

### What stressors exist at work?

Within any occupation there may be a multitude of stressors and each employee will respond in a different way to these stressors.

Typical examples of work-related stressors include:

- lack of control;
- time/deadline pressure;
- poor relationships;
- excessive travel;
- lack of consultation/communication;
- work overload;
- understaffing;
- organizational change; and
- threat of redundancy.





# The effects of stressors

## How do stressors affect people?

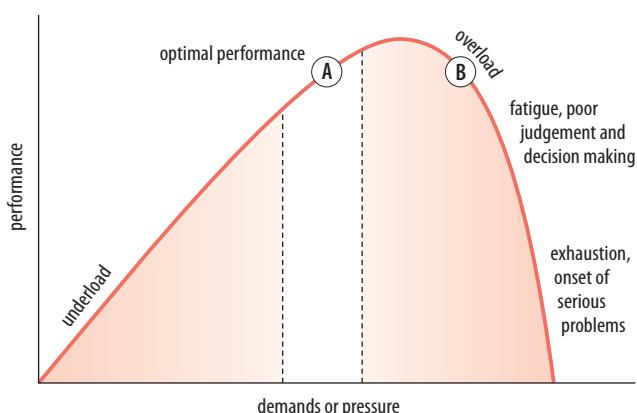
The way we think alters the way in which a stressor affects us. What is stressful to one individual may not be to another. What is stressful to an individual today may not be tomorrow.

Distress is related to the perception of loss of control that results from an imbalance between the pressures being exerted and the resources of the individual. When pressures and demands rise to a level at which the person feels out of control, the way an individual thinks, feels and behaves is altered. As a result, changes in physiological functions occur which, if unresolved, can lead to health problems. However, people tend to perform better when under a moderate amount of pressure (see Figure 1).

In Figure 1, A and B both represent high performing individuals or teams. However, A is working comfortably within the optimum zone while B is working distressed and is at high risk of developing adverse reactions.

Working at peak performance (high point on graph) is acceptable for short periods, but it is beyond the optimum zone; the level at which people can comfortably work continuously. The risk of remaining at the peak for long periods is the likelihood of additional events adding to the pressure and pushing the individual into the overload zone.

Figure 1 Demands v. performance



Once an individual has moved past the peak, into the overload zone, the movement down the slope can be sudden, and unexpected in some individuals. Without intervention this can result in illness.

A low level of perceived control of the work situation (procedures, work pacing and decisions) seems to increase the risk of health problems. Furthermore, a low level of support and feedback from supervisors and coworkers may increase the risk of poor health.

## How to recognize the signs of distress

A sustained change in behaviour and performance can be an early sign that an employee is suffering distress. Look out for deteriorating relationships with colleagues; irritability; indecisiveness; absenteeism; or reduced performance. Perceived distress will not always result in signs noticeable to others and initial changes may be quite subtle (see also examples in Table 1).

Table 1 Examples of various signs and symptoms of distress

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Emotional</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• confusion</li> <li>• loss of sense of proportion</li> <li>• lack of confidence</li> <li>• forgetfulness</li> <li>• mental block</li> <li>• lack of enthusiasm</li> <li>• feeling victimized</li> <li>• negativism</li> <li>• depression</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Intellectual</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of concentration &amp; focus</li> <li>• missing the point</li> <li>• unable to make decisions/plans</li> <li>• can't see the wood for the trees</li> <li>• short on ideas</li> <li>• thinking about the past all the time</li> <li>• work performance decreases</li> <li>• missing deadlines</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Social</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• more accidents</li> <li>• carelessness</li> <li>• overreacting</li> <li>• angry outbursts</li> <li>• can't keep still or settle down</li> <li>• confused speech</li> <li>• withdrawing from people and events</li> <li>• aggressive driving</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Physical</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• perspiring</li> <li>• looking flushed</li> <li>• increased dependence on smoking, drinking or drugs</li> <li>• eating too much or too little</li> <li>• clumsiness</li> <li>• minor ailments, headaches</li> <li>• insomnia</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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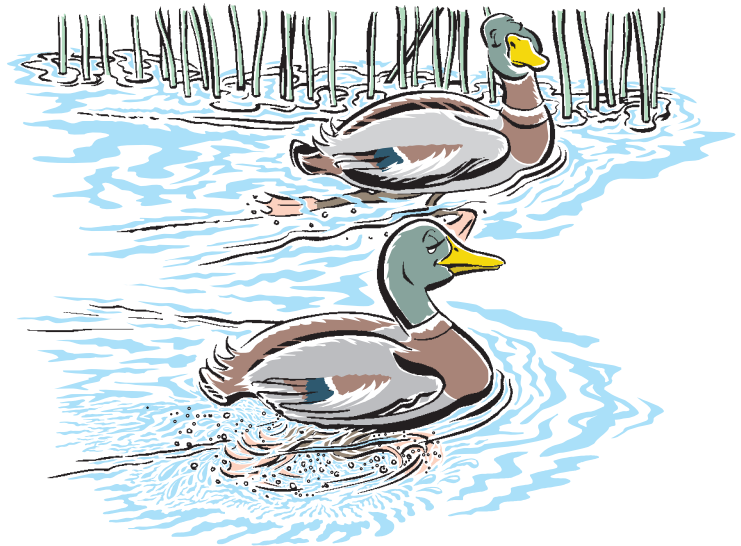
# Preventing and minimizing workplace distress

Most of the things that a supervisor can do to minimize or prevent distress are a product of good management. It is important to be aware of any pressures that might have a negative impact on any individual, and to intervene before anybody comes to harm. Good management practices should include:

- Learning about what causes distress in the workplace, and working actively to improve the working environment and minimize stressors within your control.
- Finding out whether distress could be a problem for individuals in your work group by implementing a systematic assessment.
- Working to eliminate or manage internal issues that are affecting staff.
- Understanding one's own physiological response to stressors, and working to adopt a proactive stance.

## Characteristics of good management practice

- *Good management culture exists when:*
  - employees are valued and respected;
  - health issues are treated seriously by the organization; and
  - employees receive support from the organization if they wish to raise problems affecting their work or private life.
- *Demands on staff are at the right level when:*
  - staff are able to cope with the volume and complexity of the work; and
  - work is scheduled sensibly so that there is enough time to carry out the allocated tasks and individuals are not expected to work excessively long hours.
- *Staff feel in control when:*
  - they are given a say in how they do their work; and
  - the amount of control they have is balanced against the demands placed upon them.



- *Good relationships exist when:*
  - supervisors and employees know and understand each other on a personal level;
  - there is good communication between supervisor and employees;
  - employees are not bullied or harassed;
  - supervisors regularly provide fair and specific feedback on the work done.
  - supervisors ensure that rewards (salary, promotions and allocation of tasks) are perceived as fair and in proportion to competence and effort.
- *Good change management exists when supervisors:*
  - communicate to employees the reason why change is essential;
  - involve employees and recognize their views;
  - have a clear understanding of the objective of the change;
  - have a timetable for implementing change; and
  - ensure a supportive climate for employees.

(continued on page 8 ...)

Team / Individual Stress Assessment Checklist						
Team Lead:		Team:			Date:	
Potential work-related stressors	✓	Who might be harmed	Risk (H, M, L)	What steps are currently being taken to address the situation?	What next steps or actions are to be taken?	
<b>CULTURE</b>						
Lack of open communication						
Lack of consultation						
Lack of recognition						
Blame culture						
Expectation that people will work long hours						
Lack of understanding or tolerance of diversity						
<b>ROLE &amp; DEMANDS</b>						
Role, objectives or expectation not well defined or understood						
Staff feeling that job requires them to behave in conflicting ways						
Confusion about how everyone fits in						
Lack of understanding of priorities or multiple priorities						
Too much to do. Time pressure / deadlines						
Excessive travel						
Being overly conscientious, self demanding, perfectionist						
Excessively demanding clients						
Not trained for task						
Boring or repetitive work						
Too little to do						
Poor physical environment, noise, temperature, lighting						
Inadequate technology, IT, software, support tools						
Excessive commuting, distance, time						
Increased hazards due to changes e.g. increased workload						
<b>CONTROL</b>						
No say in how work is done						
Not able to plan work						
No participation in decision making						
Excessive interruptions						
Insufficient knowledge of plans						
Fears about job or employment security / organizational change						
<b>RELATIONSHIPS &amp; SUPPORT</b>						
Isolation, home, abroad, apart from friends and family						
Poor relationships						
Bullying, racial or sexual harassment						
Lack of support from peers						
Lack of support from supervisor						

Unable to balance work and home					
No encouragement to discuss problems					
Lack of understanding of individual needs					
Lack of support during change					

Suggestions for how a supervisor can help					
CULTURE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide opportunities for staff to contribute ideas, especially in planning and organizing their own job.</li> <li>Lead by example—as a manager, you can communicate powerful signals about the importance of stress and work / life balance.</li> <li>Listen to and respect others.</li> <li>Avoid encouraging people to work excessively long hours for prolonged periods.</li> <li>Communicate regularly with your staff, particularly those working remotely. Be open and honest about what is happening at work and how this may affect them.</li> <li>Be approachable. Adopt partnership approaches to encourage staff to work with you to tackle work-related stress or any business problem. Encourage people to talk to you at an early stage about work-related stress and their concerns about work. Create an atmosphere where people feel it is ok to talk with you about any problems they are having.</li> <li>Value diversity.</li> </ul>				
	<b>ROLE &amp; DEMANDS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give clarity on the things that matter. Help staff to prioritize tasks, cut out clutter, give advance warning of urgent work.</li> <li>Match individuals to jobs and recommend training where required. Provide the right level challenge to highly qualified or experienced or under-loaded staff.</li> <li>Change the way jobs are done. Rotate staff to give additional responsibility. Increase the scope and variety of the work.</li> <li>Ensure environmental hazards such as noise, substances are properly controlled.</li> <li>Talk to staff regularly to make sure they know what their job requires them to do.</li> <li>Agree upon clear objectives.</li> <li>Demonstrate how team/individual objectives are linked to business objectives.</li> <li>Ensure there are sufficient resources. Plan to cover workloads during staff absences.</li> <li>Achieve a balance ensuring staff are interested and busy; not under-loaded or overloaded.</li> <li>Encourage staff to talk with you about problems at work.</li> <li>Ensure new members receive a thorough induction.</li> <li>Encourage staff to use a ‘calendar’ for work planning and ensure they take leave and flex days.</li> </ul>				
	<b>CONTROL</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give more control by empowering staff to plan their work and make decisions about how to achieve their objectives.</li> <li>Provide support for staff during periods of organizational change / downsizing.</li> <li>Ensure staff understand how their work fits in with the team, business unit and company aims.</li> <li>Only monitor progress/output if it is essential. Develop confidence in staff to proactively feedback progress at planned times or ad hoc.</li> <li>Communicate new developments as quickly as possible to avoid spread of rumours.</li> </ul>				
RELATIONSHIPS & SUPPORT					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide training in interpersonal skills as needed.</li> <li>Encourage staff to develop work and personal networks.</li> <li>Support and encourage staff even when things go wrong.</li> <li>Encourage sensible home-work balance.</li> <li>Agree flexible work schedule where appropriate taking individual needs and differences into account.</li> <li>Provide coaching.</li> <li>Listen to staff and agree upon a course of action for tackling any problems. It is important for staff to understand how their contribution made a difference.</li> </ul>				

## Preventing and minimizing workplace distress

- *Employees understand their role when:*
  - they know why they are undertaking the work and how this fits in with the organization's wider aims and objectives; and
  - jobs are clearly defined to avoid confusion.
- *Good training and support practice exists when:*
  - employees receive suitable and sufficient training to do their jobs;
  - employees receive support from their supervisor, even when things go wrong;
  - the organization encourages people to share their concerns about health and safety and, in particular, work-related stress; and
  - the individual is fair to the employer—i.e. they discuss their concerns and work towards agreed solutions.

### Steps for team leaders on fulfilling a personal commitment to staff

- Lead by example
- Have an open and understanding attitude
  - Talk and listen to staff
  - Ensure your staff know you and you know them
  - Establish the expectation/understanding that is okay for staff to call on their supervisors
  - Maintain an awareness of staff behaviour
- Establish a culture of team accountability (interdependent behaviour)
  - encourage staff not to overwork issues
  - share problem-solving and help each other to be successful
  - balance the workload across the team
  - ensure no individual becomes isolated
- Provide regular feedback on the 'good' and the 'not so good'

### Systematic assessment and control

Supervisors should assess the level of risk posed by stressors by applying similar processes that are used for other work-related hazards and exposures. A member of the business leadership team should sponsor this work to ensure that it receives appropriate attention.

### How do I carry out a high-level assessment and collect information?

Prior to carrying out a more detailed assessment, existing relevant data should be reviewed, where available. This information should be used to focus on where further assessment is required. Such data may include:

- results from investigation of occupational illness cases;
- sickness absence data relating to the past year;
- survey data;
- staff turnover data, and information from exit interviews;
- work optimization or demand/resource studies; and
- statistical data from employee assistance and counselling programmes.

### How do I carry out a team level assessment?

#### *Option 1: self assessment*

Use a checklist or a questionnaire (see the example 'Team/Individual Stress Assessment Checklist' on pages 6–7). Spend some time thinking about your team and the individuals, and whether they might be affected by any of the potential work-related stressors. Specifically:

- look for pressures at work that could cause high and long-lasting levels of distress;
- assess whether steps currently being taken to prevent harm are effective and appropriate;



- take additional steps if required (you must take reasonable steps to deal with distress problems); and
- review your assessment periodically, especially when significant changes occur.

### ***Option 2: survey***

The use of a stress assessment questionnaire allows the data to be aggregated to facilitate understanding of stressors. Validated questionnaires are commercially available and, if necessary, specialist resources external to the company could be used.

### ***Having completed an assessment or a survey, how do I involve the team?***

Once a self assessment or a survey has been completed it is essential to:

- involve the team to discuss results and agree upon actions;
- listen to employees and learn from them;
- facilitate active participation of employees in the risk assessment process for work-related stress; and
- enable management to demonstrate commitment to a participative process of managing the risks from work-related stressors.

Invite staff to contribute to a discussion about work-related distress and the solutions for eliminating or minimizing it. Ideally all staff should be invited to participate, but in a large organization it may be more appropriate to select representatives to form a focus group.

The following options provide ways in which such a discussion may be started:

- Talk about the various pressures mentioned in the checklist/questionnaire or survey results. Get the team to discuss results and identify options for solutions to major findings. Recognize that not all people are comfortable discussing these types of issues in a group situation—you may want to follow up later with certain individuals on a one-to-one basis.



- Ask the team to describe the ‘best/most exciting’ and the ‘worst’ aspects of their job, and whether they feel that any of these aspects causes them distress. This information can be used to identify common and persistent pressures, and the individuals that might be harmed by them. Work individually with each person to capitalize on what excites him or her about his or her work.

### **If it appears that distress could be an issue:**

- Respect the confidentiality of staff when discussing cases or sharing lessons.
- Tell the staff what you plan to do with any information you collect.
- Involve them, as much as possible, in subsequent decisions.
- Remember that some people will not feel comfortable discussing these issues and that this does not necessarily indicate they have problems.
- Write down the important findings from your assessment so that you have a record which can be referred to when reviewing progress.

## *Preventing and minimizing workplace distress*

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### **Remedial Action Plan**

Regardless of the approach taken, an important output of this detailed risk assessment is the action plan. An effective action plan will help managers maintain an adequate level of control to reduce exposures to stressors to as low as reasonably possible. Specific actions, timelines and responsible parties should be documented, and the sponsor and business leadership team should endorse the plan. A process should be in place to ensure that issues that cannot be solved on a certain level are brought to the right level of attention. Controls identified should be shown to be reasonable and practicable and clearly related to the hazards.

*This prevention process does not end with the first action plan. Rather, this should be seen as a continuous process that regularly uses evaluation data to refine or redirect the intervention strategy.*



## Intervention

### How do I deal with an employee raising a stress-related issue or displaying distress symptoms?

- Listen to the individual. Talk with the employee about what, if anything, in the workplace is contributing to the distress. Do not try to solve non-work related issues but do be open and supportive. Recognize that non-work problems can make it difficult for people to cope with the pressures of work, and work performance may suffer. It is in a supervisor's interest to remain understanding towards staff who are in this position.
- If the distress is obviously work-related try to address the source(s). Use an assessment checklist as a guide.
- Consider consulting the Human Resources (HR) and/or Occupational Health sections—they may be able to help depending upon the situation.
- Depending on the issue you may decide to refer the individual directly to the Occupational Health section who will make a medical assessment and give professional health advice to the individual. When deciding whether to refer someone to Occupational Health it is important to consider the following three options:
  1. Referral is not required for minor issues, although it can be suggested to an individual that they consider whether Medical/Occupational Health staff may be able to help.
  2. It may be felt that an individual would receive real benefit from seeing Medical/Occupational Health staff. In such a case it is recommended that they be strongly encouraged to do so.
  3. Formal referral is recommended if the issue is absence-related, if health care is required, or if the person expresses their belief that the cause is work-related. Medical/Occupational Health

staff will help to determine whether the issue is ultimately regarded as work-related.

If appropriate, encourage the employee to seek further help through their doctor, personal medical provider or employee assistance programme (EAP).

- Involve the employee in decisions by jointly agreeing actions.
- Follow up after a reasonable period of time (for example one month) to check whether things have improved.
- Find out whether others are also experiencing distress at work; if one member of the team is suffering from work-related distress, he or she may represent the tip of an iceberg.
- Finally remember that health-related issues are 'privacy cases' and should remain confidential, i.e. disclosed only to a limited sphere of appropriate individuals. It is imperative that confidentiality is not breached in any communications unless such action is necessary to comply with law or the health and safety of the individual or others.



## Employee self-help

### What can I do to help myself?

Being distressed may have an impact on logical thinking. At the time you may not be able to recognize the situation. Below are some brief suggestions for preventative strategies and managing stress at a personal level. Make sure you learn these practices now before you really need them!

- Develop support structures; talk to other individuals.
- Take control:
  - take action ... do something;
  - say no to excessive demands;
  - prioritize;
  - slow down;
  - leave on time, take a break;
  - exercise.
- Reduce pressure by being objective:
  - avoid jumping to conclusions, taking things personally, or making mountains out of molehills;
  - ask the question: 'Will it really matter five years from now?'
  - challenge the potentially unreasonable 'shoulds', 'oughts', 'musts', 'owes' and 'deserves', etc.



- Avoid using exaggerated labels such as stupid, lazy, dumb, crazy, and ugly, in conversation with others.
- Learn techniques to remain focused like mentally shouting, 'Stop!'.
- Recognize the impact of change and the stages one invariably goes through when experiencing change.
- Maintain self-esteem and remember that one is not always alone in one's thoughts and feelings.



## Questions and answers

Q. Is work-related stress a serious problem?

A. Yes. In the UK, as many as one in five people (approximately 5 million workers) suffer from high levels of work-related stress.

From NIOSH-USA: 'One-fourth of employees view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives. (Northwestern National Life); three-fourths of employees believe the worker has more on-the-job stress than a generation ago. (Princeton Survey Research Associates)

The Ministry of Health and Welfare in Japan found that 59 per cent of Japanese workers feel markedly 'fatigued' from work (Psychology, Sept. 2000)

In a transcultural comparison of stress among Chinese, Japanese and Korean students the Chinese students had a multitude of stressors and experienced the highest level of stress. (Int. Journal of Soc. Psychiatry, 1997)

Q. Does stress only happen to weak individuals?

A. No—anyone can suffer from stress. It all depends on the circumstances prevailing at the time. Prevention is good for employee health and well-being, and also good for business. Note that anyone has the potential to develop 'mental illness' but it is important that this is not confused with stress.

Q. Is counselling the answer to removing work-related stress?

A. No. Counselling may help individuals who are suffering from work-related stress, but it is unlikely to tackle the source of the problem. Research has found that support at work, particularly from managers for their staff, has a protective effect. Front line prevention by the organization is far better than any third-party attempt to provide a cure.

Q. Is work-related stress really an employer's concern?

A. Absolutely. Stress can cause illness which is never beneficial to the employee or employer. Action to reduce stress can be cost-effective: the costs of stress to a firm may include: high staff turnover; an increase in sickness absence; reduced work performance; poor timekeeping; and an increase in customer complaints. Stress in one person can also lead to stress in others who may have to cover for their colleague.

Q. Is stress not also caused by problems outside work; and is an employer therefore obliged to take action about that as well?

A. No, however non-work related problems can make it difficult for people to cope with the pressures of work, and their performance at work might ultimately suffer. It is therefore in an employer's interests to be understanding towards staff who may find themselves in such a position.

Q. Why would an employee want to tell an employer about their stress?

A. Symptoms of stress are often seen as a sign of weakness, hence employees may well be reluctant to admit that they are feeling stressed by work. Every employer can help by making it easier for their staff to discuss stress. Any information provided by an employee must always be treated in the strictest confidence.

# Resources and references

## Government and Agency resources

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### International Association of Oil & Gas Producers (OGP)

OGP represents the upstream oil and gas industry before international organizations including the International Maritime Organization, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Regional Seas Conventions and other groups under the UN umbrella. At the regional level, OGP is the industry representative to the European Commission and Parliament and the OSPAR Commission for the North East Atlantic. Equally important is OGP's role in promulgating best practices, particularly in the areas of health, safety, the environment and social responsibility.

### International Petroleum Industry Environmental Conservation Association (IPIECA)

The International Petroleum Industry Environmental Conservation Association (IPIECA) is comprised of oil and gas companies and associations from around the world. Founded in 1974 following the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), IPIECA provides one of the industry's principal channels of communication with the United Nations. IPIECA is the single global association representing both the upstream and downstream oil and gas industry on key global environmental and social issues including: oil spill preparedness and response; global climate change; health; fuel quality; biodiversity; social responsibility and sustainability reporting.

