



ORKNEY
ISLANDS COUNCIL

Stress Management Policy

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Stress Management

Statement of Policy

The Council and employees are jointly responsible for the health, safety and welfare of employees at work and recognises that their wellbeing is important to the Council's performance and image. The Council is concerned, therefore, to develop procedures, to provide training and support to help managers and employees understand and recognise the nature and causes of stress and to take positive measures to manage stress effectively.

1. What is Stress

Stress is what we experience when we cannot cope with the pressures and demands placed upon us. All work has its pressures. We all vary in our capacity to cope with different types of pressure. Some levels of pressure, even when high can be motivating and a challenge. Pressures that we can respond to effectively are likely to lead to job satisfaction. However, pressures at a level with which we cannot cope, or even in some cases too little pressure or challenge, are likely to result in stress for the individual.

This policy is concerned with the negative aspects of stress.

2. Recognising the Signs of Stress

2.1. In the Individual

Some common signs of stress are listed below, however be aware that experiencing any of these for short periods does not necessarily indicate that you are stressed. This is only likely to be indicated when one or more of these signs lingers and you have some difficulty making adjustments to cope.

- **Persistent or recurrent moods** - anger, irritability, detachment, worry, depression, guilt, sadness.
- **Physical sensations/effects** - aches and pains, raised heart rate, increased sweating, dizziness, blurred vision, skin or sleep disorders.
- **Changed behaviours** - difficulty concentrating or remembering things, unable to switch off, loss of reactivity, making more errors, double checking everything, loss of interest in sex, eating disorders, increasing use of tobacco, alcohol, coffee, drugs.

When stress is experienced over long periods other signs can develop, for example, high blood pressure, heart disease, ulcers, anxiety, long term depression.

2.2. In the Workplace

Be aware of the following possible signs:

- **Increases in overall sickness absence** - particularly frequent short absences.
- **Work performance** - less output, lower quality, poor decision making, taking work home or working longer hours but with diminishing effectiveness.
- **Relationships at work** - conflict between colleagues, changes in relationships in the workplace.
- **Staff attitude and behaviour** - loss of motivation or commitment and poor timekeeping.

3. Possible Sources of Stress in the Workplace

The following can be sources of stress arising from your work:

- Poor physical working conditions or job design.
- Excessive or uncontrolled workloads and/or conflicting demands.
- Inconsistent management.
- Poor communication by management.
- Tasks inappropriate to ability.
- Bullying and harassment.
- Poor management of workload.

Stress can also arise from the pressures people experience in their home and personal lives, e.g. bereavement, relationship or family problems, financial difficulties. These factors can make people more vulnerable to stress at work. Often, the harmful effects of stress are caused by a combination of work and home stress.

4. Self Help

4.1. Introduction

Stress is a universal experience, which can affect employees at any level in the Authority. Many aspects of stress are beneficial, helping our performance, enabling us to grow, develop and change both in the workplace and outside. However, stress can also have destructive consequences, particularly if a person perceives a situation as threatening, and feels that he or she does not possess the necessary skills, strength, stamina or confidence to cope.

In these circumstances, a person may initially feel an energy boost, but if the situation persists, and the person still feels unable to cope, he or she may eventually feel some of the unpleasant, though quite normal, reactions to stress. These may include tense muscles, quickened pulse, upset stomach, increased perspiration and feelings of anger or tearfulness. If this situation continues unchanged over a long period of time, then an individual's coping resources may become over-stretched. What follows are some useful guidelines to help people to cope better when the pressure is on.

4.2. Look After Yourself Physically

Learn how to relax properly. The easiest way is to try and work with a good relaxation tape.

Try to be aware of areas of unnecessary tension in your body. Let the tension go. Avoid becoming over-tired. Adequate rest is essential for health.

Eat sensibly. Take the trouble to learn about good nutrition.

Take a lunch break. It is unkind to your digestive system to work whilst eating.

Take regular exercise. Even a brisk 20-minute walk once a day can have important benefits.

Try to avoid too much use of "stress comfort" habits such as smoking, alcohol, drugs or over-eating. They have their own dangers!

4.3. Look After Yourself Emotionally

Keep things in perspective. Are you reading the situation correctly? What other perspectives are there?

Talk to a friend. Even if all that friend can do is listen; it will be helpful for you to put your feelings into words.

Visit places that can make you feel at ease and spend time with people who make you feel good.

Avoid depressing TV or literature for a while.

Relaxation comes into this category too because it can promote feelings of emotional wellbeing.

Make a list of things you enjoy doing. Make sure you can protect some time for yourself each week.

Stand back and take stock. List your personal positive qualities. You deserve esteem. Give it to yourself, and plan rewards for yourself in your diary.

4.4. Use Common Sense in Managing Each New Day

Control your time. List goals and be clear about them. Goals give direction and motivation. Set priorities and label them A, B or C, with Category A having highest priority. Make a daily 'To Do' list and start with the As not the Cs.

Frequently ask, "What is the best use of my time right now?".

Be realistic about deadlines. Being over-optimistic about the amount of work you can take on only means letting people down later.

If a task seems overwhelming, break it down into parts and complete them one at a time.

Avoid 'paper-shuffling'. Handle each piece of paper only once.

Aim to be decisive and try not to put decisions off.

Avoid rushing. Resist being rushed. A five-minute break every hour will increase concentration as well as reduce stress. After each break, plan to concentrate for the next hour.

Learn the language and skills of assertiveness. Learn to say 'No' when it is important to do so.

Take action on a positive plan to change the way you deal with those things which constantly cause you concern or anxiety.

5. Obtaining Help - The Options Open to You

Most of us get help informally from family, friends and colleagues, but sometimes we may need to talk to someone who is outside the situation. If you are feeling under stress, it is better not to wait for the problem to build up but to talk to someone at as early a stage as possible. A number of options are available to you:

(a) If it is a work problem or a home problem which is affecting your work, discuss it with your supervisor or manager. He or she will then be aware of the problem and will treat the matter in confidence. Should your supervisor or manager decide to recommend the involvement of the medical advisor or counsellor, the matter will need to be referred to the Personnel Section. Confidence will still be maintained.

(b) If you do not wish to approach your manager, you may contact the Personnel Section and request an appointment with either the Council's medical advisor or the completely independent professional counsellor, retained for the purpose by the Council. These services are entirely confidential.

(c) Should you be a member of a trade union, they may be able to provide support and advice.

(d) You may wish to discuss the problem with your own doctor, it may be advantageous if you informed your doctor of the Council's Stress Management Policy.

(e) The Council has in place a policy on harassment and bullying at work. If you believe such is the cause of your problem, you should refer to the Policy.

6. Managers' Responsibilities

The recognition and management of stress are integral to the Authority's employee care responsibilities and to the role of managers and supervisors. Primarily this policy should be concerned with stress arising from the working environment, but it also needs to recognise that the strands of employees' lives are often interwoven and that no one cause may be identified. Thus, an approach has to be taken of helping employees who are experiencing stress whatever the cause.

Whilst the emphasis in this policy is to encourage managers and employees to identify and deal with stress themselves there will be times when some employees may require professional help.

This Policy acknowledges that any employee could experience stress and that **seeking help and support is seen as a strength and an approach to be encouraged and not in any sense as an admission of weakness.**

All new employees must receive induction into their jobs. Starting a new job can be a stressful time and a planned activity will eliminate many concerns.

As part of the induction programme the Authority's provision for the protection of the Health and Safety of its employees should be made known and sources of help identified.

Existing employees can be at particular risk of stress when they are promoted or take on new roles. A similar induction activity should be arranged.

Recognition and management of stress are integral to the role of managers and supervisors. The following points are offered to managers and supervisors as actions which they could take, which derive from the content of the Policy, and which could make a significant impact on the reduction of stress among employees.

Some managers may be doing some of these things already, some may be doing all of them, nevertheless, if all managers improved their practice in one or more of these areas, the results could be extremely beneficial. The bullet points are:

- Identify jobs where stress has been or is a problem. See what can be done to reduce the risk of stress to jobholders.
- Meet all employees reporting directly to you on a planned and regular basis. Provide space to discuss their concerns and listen to what they say and feed back to staff on what action has been taken in relation to concerns or suggestions.
- Take care over the allocation of work. Do employees have the required skills? Are timescales reasonable?
- When employees are absent, find out why. If you are able you should visit employees on longer term absences and offer support.
- When employees are promoted or their job changes, ensure that they are given advice and support to help them adjust to the changed situation.
- Identify the training and development needs of your staff and make arrangements to monitor progress in meeting those needs.
- Recognise the negative impact of uncertainty and keep staff informed and involved in matters which affect them.

7. Training

Specific training in the management of stress will be provided to all managers. Such training will be arranged through the Orkney Health Board Health Promotion Service.