

Managing stress at work

A practical guide from Oxford Psychiatry Group for employees, managers and self-employed people.

Stress is a signal, not a personal failure

Some pressure can be motivating. Work-related stress becomes a problem when demands feel greater than the resources or control available and health or functioning is affected. Managing it should include the causes at work as well as personal coping; relaxation alone cannot fix an unsafe or unmanageable job design.

Recognise the pattern

Possible signs include feeling overwhelmed, constant worry, irritability, poor concentration, indecision, headaches, muscle tension, sleep or appetite change, avoidance, errors, withdrawal or increased alcohol, smoking or drug use. These signs are not a diagnosis and can have physical or mental-health causes. [NHS stress](#)

Check what is driving it

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Management Standards cover six areas: demands, control, support, relationships, role and change. Note specific events, frequency, impact and what would reduce the risk. Include bullying, harassment, discrimination, trauma exposure, lone working, unsafe staffing or conflict where relevant.

[HSE Management Standards](#)

Take one immediate step

If safe, tell a manager what is happening and request a private conversation. Be concrete: describe the work factor, its effect, and one practical change. If the manager is involved in the problem, use human resources, occupational health, a trade union, employee assistance programme or another named route. [Acas work-related stress](#)

Protect recovery outside work

Keep a realistic sleep and meal routine, take agreed breaks, move regularly, stay connected and avoid using alcohol or drugs to switch off. Brief breathing or grounding can reduce immediate arousal, but it should sit alongside action on the source of stress. [NHS stress](#)

A PRACTICAL PLAN

Change the work and build coping skills

Choose changes that are specific, measurable and reviewed at an agreed date.

Ask for changes at work

Examples include clearer priorities, adjusted workload or deadlines, protected breaks, fewer interruptions, more control over sequencing, regular supervision, conflict support, a quieter workspace, temporary duty changes or a phased return. The right change depends on the risk and the job; safety-critical roles need occupational advice.

[HSE work stress](#) | [Acas](#)

Reasonable adjustments

Employers must make reasonable adjustments where a worker is disabled or has a physical or mental-health condition and would otherwise be substantially disadvantaged. Legal entitlement depends on individual circumstances. Access to Work may fund additional practical or mental-health support but does not pay for adjustments the employer must make. [GOV.UK adjustments](#) | [Access to Work](#)

Use a written stress plan

Record triggers, early warning signs, helpful responses, agreed adjustments, who to contact and a review date. Keep relevant emails and meeting notes. The plan should protect confidentiality and be shared only with people who need the information.

Psychological support

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can help with worry, avoidance, perfectionism, unhelpful beliefs, problem-solving and recovery habits. Mindfulness or stress-management skills may help some people. Treatment should target an assessed difficulty and should not be used as a substitute for addressing organisational risks. [NICE](#)

[workplace wellbeing](#) | [NHS CBT tools](#)

Time away and returning

If you are unwell, discuss fitness for work with a general practitioner (GP) and, where available, occupational health. A fit note may support workplace discussion; it does not itself decide every adjustment. A return plan may include a phased increase, altered duties, supervision and planned review. [GOV.UK fit note](#)

GETTING HELP

Know which route to use

Seek help early if stress is persistent, worsening or affecting safety, health or relationships.

National Health Service support

See a GP if you are struggling to cope, self-help is not helping or physical symptoms need assessment. Adults in England can usually self-refer to NHS Talking Therapies for anxiety and depression; some services accept people from age 16. The service will assess whether a recognised treatment is appropriate. [NHS stress](#) | [NHS Talking Therapies](#)

Oxford Psychiatry Group

Oxford Psychiatry Group can assess stress alongside anxiety, depression, trauma, sleep, attention or other mental-health concerns and discuss a personalised plan. This may include psychological treatment, psychiatric review and advice about workplace adjustments. Existing patients should use their clinical letter; new patients can enquire through our website. [Oxford Psychiatry Group](#)

Independent information and support

HSE provides guidance on employers' risk-management duties. Acas gives free, impartial workplace advice. Mind has information about workplace mental health. A trade union or professional body may also help. These routes are not crisis services and legal advice may be needed for individual disputes. [HSE](#) | [Acas](#) | [Mind](#)

Terms used

Health and Safety Executive (HSE); National Health Service (NHS); National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE); general practitioner (GP); cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT); human resources (HR); accident and emergency (A&E).

Urgent help

If you or someone else is in immediate danger, call 999 or go to A&E. For urgent mental-health help that is not an immediate emergency, call NHS 111 and select the mental health option. For chest pain or other concerning physical symptoms, seek urgent medical advice. [NHS urgent help](#) | [Samaritans](#)

Trusted sources used in this leaflet

Workplace guidance: [NICE NG212](#) | [HSE](#) | [Acas](#)

Health support: [NHS stress](#) | [NHS Talking Therapies](#)

Rights: [Reasonable adjustments](#) | [Access to Work](#)

This leaflet gives general information and does not replace an individual clinical, legal, educational or occupational assessment. Guidance and links were checked on 4 September 2026. External services and availability can change. Employment rights and service routes described are primarily for England, Scotland and Wales as stated on linked pages; obtain individual employment or legal advice where needed.