What to do about WORK-RELATED STRESS

Stress can lead to underperformance and may have a long-term impact on your employees' health, so don't let the pressure get too much…

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Over the course of 2016/2017, 526,000 workers suffered from work-related stress, depression or anxiety at work, resulting in 12.5 million working days being lost. But what is work-related stress, and how can nursery leaders prevent it from becoming an issue in their settings?

Understanding stress

The Health & Safety Executive (HSE) describe stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed on them at work". Stress is a 'state of mind' rather than an illness; however, if it becomes excessive or prolonged it can lead to physical and mental health problems.

Pressure is an inherent part of work in any workplace but especially within the childcare sector, with the demands placed on both childcare practitioners and employers increasing. The recent NDNA 2017/18 Workforce Survey reported that amongst the reasons identified for staff leaving employment were "stress, long-term sickness, too much paperwork [...] and demands and responsibilities of the job".

Pressure doesn't always lead to stress, as many people are able to cope with pressure they experience – and, in some situations, it can lead to a positive performance (e.g. athletes tend to perform better in competition conditions rather than in training). However, in some cases people cannot cope with the pressure they're under and this can have a negative effect. If these feelings are short-lived, then there are very few consequences for the individual – perhaps a few sleepless nights – but if the feeling of stress continues, this can escalate into psychological illness and physical ill-health.

The HSE's Management Standards for work-related stress classifies the causes under six headings, as follows:

Demands - Excessive demands of the job in terms of workload. This might too much or too little, speed of work and deadlines as well as working hours and work patterns. This was another factor highlighted in NDNA's 2017/18 Workforce Survey, which noted that "79% of staff told us they worked overtime, with just over a third (33%) telling us that overtime varied on a week-to-week basis".

Control - Lack of control over work. This could include control over what work is to be done, when and how, the priorities involved and even simple things like an employee not being able to use their own initiative or have control over the working environment.

Support - Lack of support can include information, instructions and training as well as a lack of support by managers and colleagues.

Relationships - Poor workplace relationships or conflict and in particular bullying and harassment (whether by managers, peers or even subordinates), and lack of policies and procedures to deal with these problems. Research published by the TUC (Trades Union Congress) in 2015 reveals that nearly a third of people have been bullied at work.

Role - Lack of clarity about an individual's role, what responsibilities and authority they have and how they fit into the organisational structure.

Change - The threat of change and the change process itself, whether it affects one worker or the whole team. This can create huge anxiety and insecurity, usually through a lack of consultation, communication and support during the periods of change. This was a cause of workforce turnover highlighted in NDNA's latest survey: "[F]indings demonstrated that 69% of Level 3 staff left due to government policy changes."

Acting quickly can reduce the impact of pressure and make it easier to reduce or even remove the causes of the individual's stress. If an employer is worried that an individual is showing signs of stress the latter should be encouraged to see their GP.

The impact

The effects of stress on a worker's performance can be negative and may include reduced and inconsistent performance through lack of concentration, poor decision making, lateness, regular periods of absenteeism and a loss of commitment and motivation. If the stress is not addressed and allowed to continue the effects can lead to the complete physical and mental breakdown of the individual.

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Stress and the law

There is no specific health and safety legislation relating solely to stress in the workplace. However, employers have duties under the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974, and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 to:

● ensure the health, safety and welfare of all employees so far as is reasonably practicable;
● carry out risk assessments relating to the risk to health;
● implement and maintain control measures.

Your policy

Implementing a stress-management policy is a proactive measure that will demonstrate commitment to protecting the health, safety and welfare of employees by recognising that workplace stress is a health and safety issue.

The policy should create the framework for combating stress in the workplace and a working environment and culture that has a positive approach to the mental health and wellbeing of its employees. It should support employees at all levels to manage stress themselves and provide managers with necessary training to support employees with mental health problems. It should detail specific roles and responsibilities, and outline methods to be used to identify all workplace stressors and ways in which to minimise stress in the workplace.

Risk assessment

It is essential that employers include stress in their risk assessment programme. A stress risk assessment may relate to a team, department or an individual and should follow the HSE's Stress Management Standard. Employers have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work by carrying out a risk assessment and acting on its findings. Remember, if you have more than five employees you are required by law to write the risk assessment down.

Prevention

Since it is not normally possible to remove all workplace pressures, your primary prevention strategy should focus on identify and addressing the sources of stress using the HSE standard. There are a range of techniques and tools that can be used to identify stress-related issues in the workplace, which include stress audits, surveys and focus groups.

Proactive controls to prevent stress in the workplace can include planning workloads effectively, team meetings, appraisals, staff development programmes, allocation of clear roles and responsibilities and effective communication.

Secondary prevention is concerned with increasing the individual's ability to cope with the demands and stress, raising awareness of stress as a health issue and training. Tertiary prevention involves reactive support for an individual who has indicated they have a problem with stress; this might include counselling, cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and employee assistance programmes (EAP).

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RECOGNISE THE WARNING SIGNS

Stress can have physical, psychological and behavioural effects, and these may have either a short- or long-term impact…

● **Physical** – Short-term effects include sweating, fast heartbeat, increased blood pressure, skin rashes and reddening, muscle tensions and headaches. Long-term effects include high blood pressure, heart disease, eczema, chronic back pain and irritable bowel syndrome.
● **Psychological** – Short-term effects include lack of concentration, poor memory, low self-esteem, irritability and withdrawal. Long-term effects include anxiety, depression and bipolar disorder.
● **Behavioural** – Short-term effects include changes in eating habits, increased use of alcohol and/or drugs, sleeping problems and aggression. Long-term effects include eating disorders and drug and/or alcohol addiction.