



For better
mental health

The Mind guide to surviving working life

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'In order that people may be happy in their work, these three things are needed: they must be fit for it; they must not do too much of it; and they must have a sense of success in it.'

John Ruskin

'When my wife left me I felt my whole world had collapsed. I couldn't sleep, spent a lot of time with whisky, and ate little. I tried to carry on. I didn't tell anyone at work for some time. I felt ashamed. I couldn't concentrate, was ratty with colleagues and unable to work properly. People were getting fed up with me. I was starting to wonder if I would lose my job as well. In the end my manager talked with me. I felt bad at first, but I opened up and we talked about time off for me to seek legal advice, get support for me and sort out practical arrangements for the children.'

Gerald

This leaflet is about staying well at work, whether you are returning to the world of work after time away with mental distress, are experiencing work stress, or trying to maintain a healthy working life.

Not all work is paid work. People work and gain skills in many ways: through bringing up children, caring for relatives, maintaining the home and garden, or doing voluntary work for the community. While these are all tremendously important, the focus of this booklet is on paid employment.

How do work patterns affect us?

Jobs often used to be for the best part of someone's working life. They provided security, stability and structure. However, people can now expect many changes in the course of their

working lives. These may include changing employer, re-training, periods of unemployment, and even complete changes of occupation. More and more, people have short or fixed-term contracts, or work on a self-employed basis, and have career breaks. Individuals usually have to construct their own career paths, which can lead to uncertainty about the future, as well as unrealistic workloads for some and no work for others. And while it's possible to embrace an alternative point of view, and thrive without paid employment, unemployment generally leads to poor physical health, poor mental health and poverty.

So being in paid employment is generally considered to be a good thing. It is no longer just a way of earning a living: it provides identity, contact and friendship with other people, a way of putting structure in your life and an opportunity to meet goals and to contribute.

Having said that, work stress is now more of an issue than ever: every year, millions of work days are lost because people experience illnesses caused or made worse by their work.

The Health and Safety Executive defines stress as '*The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them.*'

Some of the symptoms of stress are:

- **physical** – fatigue, indigestion, headaches, appetite and weight changes, joint and back pain
- **psychological** – anxiety, tearfulness, feeling low, mood changes, indecision, loss of motivation, increased sensitivity
- **behavioural** – increased smoking and drinking, withdrawal or aggression, lateness, recklessness.

What causes stress at work?

The job

Job demands that can lead to stress include: having too much or too little to do; work that is too difficult or too easy; being under pressure to meet deadlines; shift work; and physically demanding work. People doing repetitive tasks, at a high pace, with little freedom to take decisions are especially at risk. Lack of control over the pace of the work or how to get the job done is one of the most common causes of work-related stress.

Poor working conditions, such as noise or bad lighting, poorly designed equipment, exposure to hazards or witnessing other people's suffering are all sources of stress. People who are simply in the wrong job for their skills, abilities and expectations are also likely to experience stress.

Your role in the organisation

Problems can occur if people aren't clear about the scope or responsibilities of their job. Conflicting demands make them feel very torn; for example, the demands of quantity versus quality, or quantity versus safety, or being expected to do things against their beliefs or personal and professional standards. This is made worse if there is a lack of managerial or supervisory support. In turn, managers and supervisors can find that the responsibility to provide this support conflicts with other goals expected of them by the organisation; or they may not receive the training to enable them to offer effective support.

Career development

Feeling trapped in a dead-end job, or insecure, is also very undermining. This may be because there are only limited opportunities for promotion and training, a threat of redundancy through organisational restructuring, or because you are working on a fixed-term contract.

Relationships at work

The relationships we have with our colleagues, can have an enormous effect on the quality of our working life, and can be significant sources of stress or support. Supportive relationships can give protection against other workplace pressures; stressful relationships can intensify them.

Working in isolation from others makes it more difficult to build supportive relationships; for example, for people who work at home or run their own small businesses. But isolation isn't only physical – it may include being the only man or woman or person of an ethnic minority in a workplace.

Bullying is a major source of stress and is very destructive, to the person being subjected to it and to the organisation itself. (See Mind's booklet, *How to deal with bullying at work*.)

Organisational structures and culture

The operating style or 'culture' of an organisation may cause problems. It may include lack of communication, consultation or participation in decision making, and unjustified restrictions on behaviour. If there are no policies in place to cover these matters, there will be no clear standards for the behaviour that is expected, and no system for individuals to challenge racism, sexism or other discrimination or harassment. This promotes the attitude that people should just deal with it on their own. An organisation that runs on fear, or interprets stress as individuals not coping, will simply generate more stress.

Personal factors

What we bring with us to work can also contribute to stress. This may be the conflicting demands of managing home and work life; personal crises, such as illness or bereavement; financial worries; or the psychological factors that can drive us to unhealthy working patterns.

One common pattern is when a person works harder and harder to close the gap between what they are achieving, and what they think they should be achieving. They stop taking breaks, lose touch with their own needs and sense of enjoyment, and feel guilty when they are not working. Working harder brings exhaustion, their performance deteriorates, and they become more and more anxious, because they aren't making real progress. It leads to loss of energy, emotional exhaustion, poor sleep, indecisiveness, and sometimes increased drinking, smoking, eating or spending. The person ends up feeling trapped, and can become depressed.

How can I tackle stress?

Preventing stress means achieving a balance between demands and the capacity to respond to them. Learn to recognise what you find stressful in the work environment and what helps you work well. Taking action, however small, can improve your life at work and stop you feeling trapped or the victim of people's demands. You may be free to do some things without reference to anyone else, but some things you will need to negotiate, formally or informally, with colleagues or managers. However, there are many things employees can do for themselves.

Taking control

- Develop good relationships with colleagues so that you can build up a network of support.
- Talk to someone you trust, at work or outside, about what upsets you or makes you feel stressed. This is not a sign of weakness, it's taking responsibility for your wellbeing.
- Treat colleagues with the respect and consideration you want from them.
- Communicate if you need help.
- Be assertive – say no if you can't take on extra demands.

- Be realistic – you don't have to be perfect all the time.
- Write a list of what needs to be done; it only takes a few minutes and can help you to prioritise, focus and get things in perspective. It can also feel satisfying to tick items off once they have been done.
- If everything starts to feel overwhelming, take a deep breath. Try and get away from your desk or situation for a few minutes – get a drink or go to the toilet.
- Try and take a walk or get some fresh air during the day – exercise and daylight are beneficial to mental as well as physical health.
- Make sure you drink enough water and that you eat during the day to maintain your energy levels.
- Learn some relaxation techniques.
- Work regular hours and take the breaks and holidays you're entitled to. If things are getting too much, book a day off or a long weekend.
- Try not to work long hours or take work home with you. This may be all right in the short term, if the work has a specific purpose and is clearly defined – a team effort to complete an urgent project may be very satisfying – however, working longer hours does not generally lead to better results.
- Maintain a healthy work-life balance – nurture your outside relationships, interests, and the abilities your job does not use.

Preventing stress with the help of your employer

- Make your physical work environment as comfortable to work in and appropriate to your needs as you can. If necessary, enlist the help of a health and safety officer.
- Discuss your workload, or the organisation of your work with your manager or supervisor. Get feedback on your work, and discuss setting realistic targets and how you can solve any problems you are having. If you can't resolve problems in this way, talk to the human resources department or trade union representative.

- Ask how your goals fit in with the organisation's overall aims and objectives so that you can see a real purpose to your work.
- Discuss the possibility of flexitime (flexible working hours), if, for example, you have difficulty with rush-hour travel, or need to leave work early some days to get to a support group or fit in with child care.
- Make use of the support already on offer: some organisations provide employee assistance programmes providing free advice and counselling; others have internal systems such as co-worker support.

Organisational culture

- Be aware of any policies on harassment, bullying or racism, so that you know what behaviour the company considers unacceptable, how to challenge it and what support there is.
- If stress, work overload, bullying or poor communication are issues for you, they are probably issues for others in the organisation as well. Sharing your concerns with those you trust could lead to more of a joint effort to get your employer to introduce changes; for example, better consultation within the organisation, an anti-bullying policy, a commitment to tackling stress through health and safety policies, or an investment in staff support.
- If you are aware of bad practice in the organisation (for example, financial corruption or abusive behaviour towards clients or staff) find a way of speaking out about it. Do protect your own position though, and get advice, for example, from the union, employee assistance programme (if your organisation has one) or Public Concern at Work (see 'Useful organisations').

Note: even if you work for a small business, such as a local shop or tradesman, you should still be provided with a contract of employment that includes terms and conditions; and there should

be basic policies in place for employees, that include health and safety, and working conditions.

Career development: staying or moving on

- Make the most of any opportunities for training and development offered by your employer.
- Keep your CV up to date, and plan for the future. It's worth thinking about your career path, whatever your situation, so that you can be positive about staying or moving on.
- Use careers counselling or similar expertise if you feel stuck, bored, want a change of direction, or feel your job is doing you harm and you don't know what you want to do. A crisis can force a change of direction, though it's probably not a good idea to make major life-decisions when you are in the middle of one. Look at the options, when you are able, so you can act when the time is right.
- Use whatever counselling or support is available, if you are facing redundancy or retirement.

What if I do become distressed at work?

Anyone can become upset and reveal to their workmates that they are human. People who use mental health services may have particular need for a safe space to express feelings. If someone is going through a mental health crisis or breakdown, whether or not it's caused by work stress, it will be experienced in their working life.

If you can learn to identify what triggers your stress, this will make it a lot easier to find the right coping strategy. If you do get distressed, keep a diary of what happened, how you felt and how you reacted, so that you can cope better the next time the same type of situation arises; or indeed to learn to avoid that type of situation if at all possible.

Ways of coping

- A brief time-out period when you are distressed could restore you and allow you to continue working.
- You may need a quiet place away from colleagues and clients to shout or cry.
- You may prefer someone to be with you to help calm you down or just listen.
- You could learn specific therapeutic techniques using breathing or meditation, or exercises that improve your energy.

These are just some examples, and it may take a few tries at finding what works for you. But once you know what you are likely to need, you may be able to make or negotiate with your employer, in advance, the conditions that will allow you to help yourself feel better and get back to working.

Getting help

If you are worried about your mental health, or other people are expressing concerns, you may want to get professional help. This is not giving in, it's taking action. If you work for a large organisation, they may have an occupational health service. Someone in the workplace is not only easier to access, but has the advantage of understanding the organisation and being a potential ally in dealing with your supervisor. However, if you do not feel secure enough in your job to approach them, or there is no service available, you may want to talk to your GP or a counsellor. You may need time off work; and sickness absence with mental health problems is just as valid as that for any physical health problems.

How can I keep my job after experiencing mental distress or illness?

Returning to work

If you have to take time off from your job to improve your mental health, it can be quite daunting returning to work. But you don't have to apologise or justify being in mental distress, any more than you would if you were recovering from an accident or operation.

In the midst of a mental health crisis, people sometimes say or do things they wouldn't otherwise say or do. If this has happened, then you may feel the need to rebuild relationships. But, very often, other staff will just be glad to see you back at work, and you should try to accept that. People are able to empathise, and are more likely to have been busy with their own lives and work, rather than preoccupied with why you have been off sick or what led up to it.

However, there are some practical things you can do to ease things, before you return completely:

- keep in touch with colleagues on a social basis
- ask to be put on the mailing list for any staff bulletin or house magazine so that you have the opportunity to get up-to-date with developments
- drop in to work before starting back, to say hello to colleagues and get re-familiarised
- ask if you could have a gradual build-up to full hours (just as you might expect after breaking a leg or a major operation)
- ask your employer to consider short-term (or even permanent) changes to your job or hours, if you feel this is needed.

For many people, what matters is knowing that they don't have to hide distress and will be allowed to get on with their job without feeling pressurised to continue if they do in fact need to stop or slow down sometimes. If you need feedback from another person to help you recognise when you are overdoing it, you could discuss with a trusted colleague what they need to be aware of, and what kind of support you would welcome.

Making adjustments to how you work

Many of the adjustments that can help with mental health are things you might expect an employer to adopt as a matter of ordinary good practice; some you may be able to organise for yourself; others would require action, or at least agreement, on the part of the employer. The key to negotiation with the employer is to think creatively about what will enable you to do your job effectively. Here are some examples:

- using voice-mail to take messages (without slowing down the overall response time) if phone calls make you anxious
- a quiet workspace to avoid distractions and aid concentration, or being able to work from home
- changing your supervisor, if another would be more flexible
- restructuring a job or temporarily reallocating some of the duties (for example, 'front-line' work)
- using email when face-to-face contact is too stressful
- flexible hours to accommodate therapy, medical appointments, rush-hour pressures or the morning drowsiness associated with some medicines
- on-the-job support, or permission for a support worker to come in or to be contacted during work hours
- permission to take time out when distressed: this could just be a few minutes away from your workstation, going out for some air, or having a short rest
- a workstation by a window, or a lightbox, if you have seasonal affective disorder.

You are probably the best judge of what would be most successful for you. If you want to think through some of the possibilities with another person, before negotiating with your employer, or have someone to back up your request, you could speak with someone involved with your care or treatment, a local supported employment organisation, or with a disability employment adviser (DEAs), who are part of Jobcentre Plus (see 'Useful organisations'). DEAs can give you advice and carry out an employment assessment to find out what assistance you may need. Via the Access to Work scheme, they may be able to help you get funding for changes to premises, equipment, personal support or assistance, or help with extra costs of getting to work.

Your rights at work

The law says you have a right not to be discriminated against in employment on grounds of race, gender, age, religion or belief, sexual orientation, or disability. A person with a mental illness that has a substantial and long-term effect (12 months, or more) on their ability to carry out day-to-day activities is considered disabled. You would still be covered if these effects are controlled by treatment, if you have recurrent episodes, or if you have met the definition of 'disabled' in the past.

The employment sections of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) apply to all employers, except the armed services. The Act requires employers not to treat disabled employees or applicants less favourably than other people, and public authorities have an additional duty to actively promote disability equality. Employers must make 'reasonable adjustments'; in other words take reasonable steps to change work environments or arrangements that put a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage. The law applies to training and promotion, as well as recruitment, and outlaws victimisation of people bringing complaints.

You can ask for adjustments, under the DDA, at the point when you need them, even if you did not volunteer information about mental health problems earlier. However, if you were asked directly about your health record when you applied for a job, concealing information could be grounds for dismissal. The DDA does not protect against this.

If you have a complaint under the DDA, or any other law related to employment, you can take it to an employment tribunal. Get advice from your trade union, local Citizens Advice or the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. (See 'Useful organisations' for more information.)

Health and safety

Your employer also has a duty of care to you under 'health and safety' legislation. All workers have a right to work in places where risks to their health and safety are properly controlled, and the employer also has responsibilities to protect employees after returning to work from sickness absence if they have become more vulnerable to risk because of illness, injury or disability. The Health and Safety Executive can provide more information on workplace hazards, including stress. (See 'Useful organisations'.)

Should I tell my employer if I have a mental illness?

Some people say you should be open about mental illness. Others advise against it, where there is a choice. Some recommend waiting until the employer has formed an impression of you based on your abilities and character, not on their preconceptions. Some companies have positive policies on disability and equality at work, which ought to mean that being open about your mental health is less of a risk.

An employer only has to make adjustments for needs that they know about. Therefore, if you want the protection of the DDA, or simply want your employer to understand your needs, you will have to make sure that someone in a responsible position knows what they are. This could be your manager or the human resources (personnel) department.

If you do decide to tell, think about how and when to do it, how much information you want to give, what kind of information, and who to share it with. For example, the human resources department may know your diagnosis, but they don't have to tell your supervisor or workmates.

You don't have to go into personal details; focus on what you need for the job. Employers' concerns tend to arise out of assumptions about poor work performance. They want to know if you can do the job and will get along with the customers or clients and the rest of the team. If you can show that your objective is to get the job done, this should go a long way to reassuring them. Being straightforward and unembarrassed about your history will help them get it in to perspective.

The potential risks of disclosing something about your mental health history include:

- not getting the job
- being teased or harassed by other employees
- being assumed to be a less productive member of the team
- having fewer opportunities for career development
- being treated as more vulnerable than other employees, or having everything (anger, excitement, time off sick, or a grievance) associated with your mental illness
- coming under closer scrutiny than other employees, and having to work harder to gain the same respect.

The potential benefits of disclosure are:

- being open about it can encourage others in the same situation
- keeping it secret may be too stressful, or against your beliefs
- it gives you a stronger basis for requesting adjustments to your job or work environment
- it could give you the opportunity to involve an outside adviser or support worker, who could see you at work or speak directly with your employer
- it could make it easier to go into work at times when your symptoms are greater
- it enables you to enlist the support of colleagues.

Useful organisations

Mind

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: www.mind.org.uk or Mindinfo on 0845 766 0163.

The Andrea Adams Trust

helpline: 01273 389 412, web: www.andreaadamstrust.org
Charity tackling workplace bullying

Equality and Human Rights Commission

helpline England: 0845 604 6610, helpline Wales: 0845 604 8810
web: www.equalityhumanrights.com

Employment Tribunals

tel. 0845 795 9775, web: www.employmenttribunals.gov.uk
Gives guidance on the tribunal system

Health and Safety Executive Information Services

infoline: 0845 345 0055, web: www.hse.gov.uk

Public Concern at Work

tel. 020 7404 6609, web: www.pcaw.co.uk

Helps organisations and individuals create a culture where it is safe and accepted for staff to raise concerns about poor work practices

Trades Union Congress (TUC)

tel. 020 7636 4030, web: www.tuc.org.uk

Working Families

tel. 020 7253 7243, web: www.workingfamilies.org.uk

Promotes and campaigns for work-life balance

Useful websites

www.citizensadvice.org.uk

www.direct.gov.uk

Information about employment rights and services and career advice

www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk

www.nice.org.uk

Have produced guidance: *Promoting wellbeing at work* (Nov 2009)

www.theworkfoundation.com

Further reading

- ☐ *Building solutions 1: improving office environments* (Mind 2006) £2
- ☐ *How to assert yourself* (Mind 2006) £1
- ☐ *How to deal with anger* (Mind 2009) £1
- ☐ *How to deal with bullying at work* (Mind 2008) £1
- ☐ *How to look after yourself* (Mind 2006) £1
- ☐ *How to rebuild your life after breakdown* (Mind 2009) £1
- ☐ *How to recognise the early signs of mental distress* (Mind 2008) £1
- ☐ *How to stop worrying* (Mind 2006) £1
- ☐ *Managing for mental health: the Mind employers' resource pack* (Mind 2006) £15.99
- ☐ *The Mind guide to advocacy* (Mind 2006) £1
- ☐ *The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2009) £1
- ☐ *The Mind guide to physical activity* (Mind 2008) £1
- ☐ *The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2009) £1
- ☐ *Mind troubleshooters: panic attacks* (Mind 2009) 50p
- ☐ *Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2009) £1
- ☐ *Understanding depression* (Mind 2008) £1
- ☐ *Understanding mental illness* (Mind 2009) £1
- ☐ *Understanding post-traumatic stress disorder* (Mind 2009) £1
- ☐ *Understanding talking treatments* (Mind 2009) £1

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Mind's mission

- Our vision is of a society that promotes and protects good mental health for all, and that treats people with experience of mental distress fairly, positively, and with respect.
- The needs and experiences of people with mental distress drive our work and we make sure their voice is heard by those who influence change.
- Our independence gives us the freedom to stand up and speak out on the real issues that affect daily lives.
- We provide information and support, campaign to improve policy and attitudes and, in partnership with independent local Mind associations, develop local services.
- We do all this to make it possible for people who experience mental distress to live full lives, and play their full part in society.

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, MindinfoLine: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.00am to 5.00pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, MindinfoLine has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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Mind (National Association for Mental Health)

15-19 Broadway

London E15 4BQ

tel. 020 8519 2122

fax: 020 8522 1725

web: www.mind.org.uk



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