



## Stress in the Workplace

Workplace stress is not defined by law. It can be caused by a number of things, including:

- an unreasonable workload;
- lack of health and safety precautions against hazards;
- workplace bullying;
- workplace restructuring;
- a toxic work environment.

An employer must make sure, as reasonably possible, that health and safety risks in the workplace are identified and managed properly. This includes workplace stress and fatigue.

Employers are obliged to monitor employees for potential workplace stress, such as keeping an eye on workload, job performance and the types of tasks being performed, as well as looking for any physical signs of stress.

However, the stress may not always be obvious to the employer, so it's important that if employees are stressed in the workplace, they discuss it with their employer so that their employer has a chance to [manage the stress](#).

### Leave options for workplace stress

Workplace stress may be an illness. An employee with workplace stress that amounts to an illness may take sick leave. The ordinary conditions for sick leave apply.

In addition to sick leave, it might be possible for the employer and the employee to negotiate further leave for stress. As this is not a legal entitlement, it's up to the employer whether or not further leave is provided. This can help to make sure the employee is both healthy and productive. The length of the leave and whether the leave is paid or unpaid will have to be negotiated.

## **Obligations and responsibilities when dealing with workplace stress**

An employer may ask an employee who says they have workplace stress to see a doctor to be properly diagnosed and confirm the reason for the stress, but the employee is under no obligation to do this. However, an employee has a duty to report any workplace threat to their health and safety, which may include stress.

If an employee has been sick for a period of 3 or more consecutive days, the employer can ask the employee to provide a medical certificate. In the interests of privacy, the medical certificate only needs to state that the employee is unfit to attend work.

If the employee doesn't want to say the illness is workplace stress or provide details, this will limit the employer's ability to reduce stress.

It's best for an employee to tell their employer when they are feeling stressed. This does not mean that the employee has to tell the employer about any medical issues caused by the stress. Simply breaking down the causes together will help the employer to do something about it.

If the employee chooses to identify the source of the illness as workplace stress, it's the employer's responsibility to:

- look into the issues;
- come to their own decision about whether the problem is work-related;
- discuss the situation with the employee;
- agree on appropriate solutions.

Often, workplace stress will be unavoidable. In this situation, the best an employer can do is to try to minimise the source of the stress.

In order to minimise stress, an employer might:

- provide support (eg an employee assistance programme);
- provide additional resources (eg providing assistance with work);
- provide leave for stress;
- liaise with the employee and the employee's doctor or medical specialist;
- discuss and adjust the mix of duties;

- reduce the employee's hours by agreement;
- suggest alternative, less stressful roles for the employee.

### **Tips for employees**

Some strategies for managing workplace stress can include:

- taking regular breaks;
- learning how to act rather than react – we experience stress when we feel situations are out of our control;
- taking a deep breath – a few minutes of deep breathing can help restore balance if you are feeling stressed; there are some great tools to help with this at QuietKit;
- minimising interruptions – make a plan to control regular interrupters, for example, only answer emails during certain windows of time;
- eating and sleeping well;
- keeping physically fit by doing regular exercise.

This resource was provided by:

