



# Work-related Stress

A pocket guide for  
RCN representatives

Healthy workplace, healthy you

## About this resource

I am delighted, as Chair of the UK Safety Reps Committee, to present this resource for RCN learning reps, safety reps and stewards to help you to support members who are experiencing work-related stress. The guidance draws on the *Health and Safety Executive Management of Stress Standards (2017)* and is intended to sit alongside the more detailed guidance which is available on the RCN website.

This pocketbook is divided into three main sections: working with your employer, supporting members, and looking after yourself. It has been developed by RCN reps and staff working together in partnership and I am confident that it will be a useful resource for you in your work with members.

### Ali Upton, Chair of UK Safety Reps Committee

This document has been designed in collaboration with our members to ensure it meets most accessibility standards. However, if this does not fit your requirements, please contact:

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## Introduction

Work-related stress could be caused by issues such as poor staffing levels; lack of consultation and communication on changes in the workplace; culture of bullying; or lack of managerial support.

The *HSE/HSENI Management of Stress Standards* (2017) clearly show that the focus of the employer must be on addressing the causes of work-related stress, while supporting the individuals who are experiencing difficulties as a result. HSE/HSENI have identified six key areas (or 'risk factors') that can be causes of work-related stress. These are shown opposite, with the related *RCN Nursing Workforce Standards* (NWS) shown in brackets.

- 1. Demands** – Includes issues like workload, work patterns and the work environment. (NWS 3, 8, 9, 11,12)
- 2. Control** – How much say the person has in the way they do their work. (NWS 4, 7, 13)
- 3. Support** – Includes the encouragement, sponsorship and health and wellbeing resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues. (NWS 3, 4, 7, 12,13)
- 4. Relationships** – Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour. (NWS 12, 13)
- 5. Role** – Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles. (NWS 7, 12, 13)
- 6. Change** – How organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation. (NWS 7, 12, 13)

Approaches that solely rely on efforts to build resilience across the workforce are not considered to be an appropriate way to discharge

employer obligations around staff health and wellbeing. Identifying and addressing the risk factors that lead to high levels of employee stress is a legal requirement on employers. Attempts to train staff to withstand greater levels of pressure and stress focusses attention in the wrong place and fails to deliver on the legal duty on the employer to reduce and eliminate risk where practicable.

Factors outside work, such as a bereavement in the family, a partner being made redundant or financial difficulties, can also lead to excessive stress and can impact on members' ability to manage work-related pressures. A good employer will recognise this and, where appropriate, will offer additional support such as special leave or access to employee assistance programmes.

As an RCN representative your role is to hold your employer to account for undertaking their legal duties and ensure that the experiences of your members are represented and reflected in your employers' plans to manage and monitor work-related stress.

## **Getting started: preparing the organisation**

The first step for your employer should be to set up a working group to oversee the stress risk assessment process. This can be the existing Health and Safety (and Risk) Committee (H&S Committee), or a group set up specifically for this purpose (for example, Health and Wellbeing Group) and should include trade union representation, but also, where available, HR, health and safety, and occupational health specialists.

Trade union reps, where available, should also be involved in subgroup work that takes related projects/ pieces of work forward. These groups are often led by the Director of HR/Director of Workforce, who will also then report through to the H&S Committee.

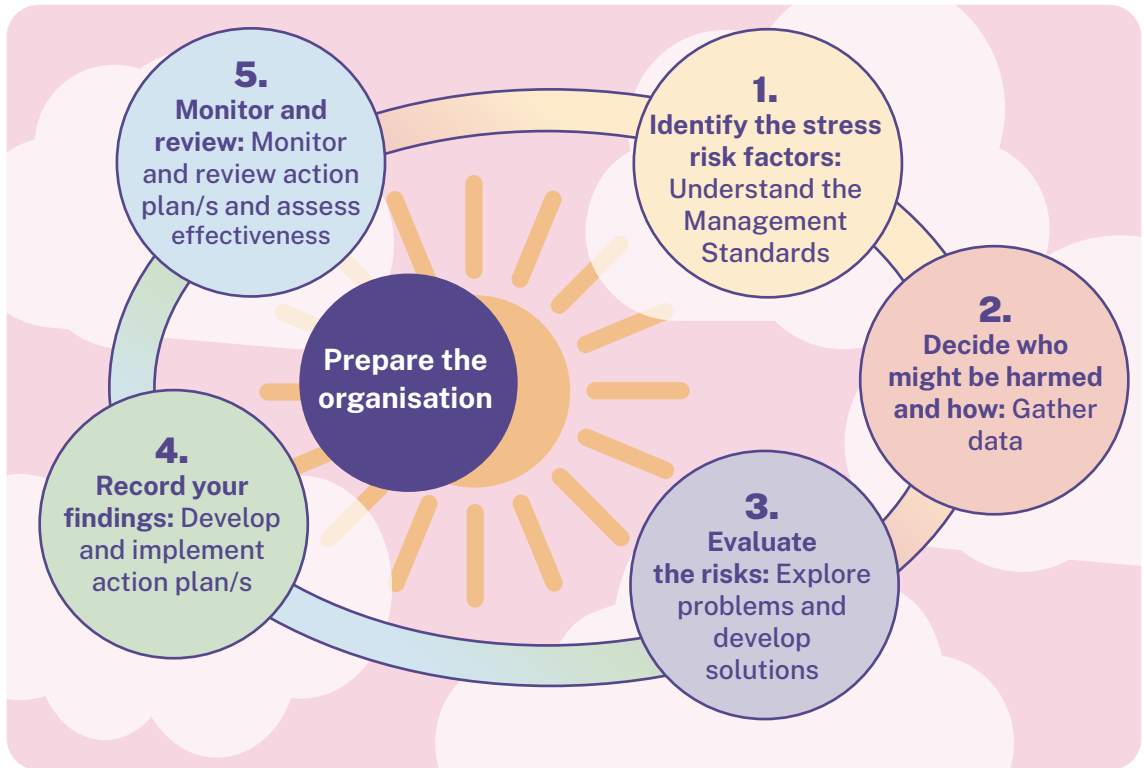
If you work in a smaller organisation there might be a less formalised structure. You could contact your Head of HR, or senior managers, to ask how they are approaching the management of work-related stress

and how you can get involved as an RCN rep.

Further information on what you should expect from your employer's working group can be found in the TUC and HSE's guidance, *Tackling workplace stress using the HSE Stress Management Standards (2017)*.

## The process

Fig 1: The Management Standards Approach



## 1. Identify the stress risk factors

Your employer should be aware of the *HSE Stress Management Standards (2017)* and the six key areas (or ‘risk factors’) that can be causes of work-related stress.

The *HSE Stress Management Standards (2017)* approach and how it applies in your workplace should be explained by your employer so that everyone understands it. Some organisations have used the Standards to help develop their stress policy documents. This can help explain the reasons for using the approach and can define the roles and responsibilities of those involved in making the policy work.

Workforce dashboards can provide managers (and staff side/trade union reps) with useful trend data around areas of concern. Staff side/trade union reps can then highlight these to the employer and meetings can be held with relevant managers to discuss the issues and develop a plan to address.

Don't forget that if you are a safety rep you have a legal entitlement to workplace data around health

and safety under the *Safety Representatives and Safety Committee Regulations 1977/Brown Book*.

## 2. Decide who might be harmed and how

Your employer should be gathering data that can be used to provide an accurate picture of your organisation and the incidence of work-related stress.

Annual staff surveys and/or the *HSE Stress Management Standards (2017)* framework can be used to gather the views of employees. These can be used as a source of data but should not be the only data used to assess those at risk. It is good practice for your employer to use a number of sources and look for relationships within the data to get a more accurate view of the current state of your organisation. Good employers will share information with staff about areas of focus or concern coming out of survey results.

Your employer can also carry out an inspection of the workplace to check for physical sources of

stress, checking environmental issues such as access to rest facilities, hydration, appropriate equipment. The analysis of data should be used and shared by your employer so that the working group can build a joint understanding of your organisation's current situation.

If you are a safety rep you can also carry out workplace inspections on behalf of, and with, your members. Make sure to build in some time to chat informally to members as part of your inspection as this is when they might bring up issues about work-related stress. You can also look at the rest facilities available to staff and the staffing levels/skill mix on the day of your inspection. These can be areas that the employer might not consider as part of their inspection.

### Think about



- Has your employer completed risk assessments in relation to work-related stress?
- Do staff have access to staff rooms and rest areas away from the public?

- Are there adequate changing facilities?
- Is it possible to obtain food at all hours of a working shift?
- Is car parking available and secure?
- Is security cover provided for staff at night?
- Are staff properly prepared for their roles – do they understand what is required and, where appropriate, are they psychologically prepared?
- Are shift patterns well designed and flexible to suit the needs of staff as well as the organisation?
- Is basic equipment in place and are training programmes provided?
- Are there sufficient staff to ensure that care is safe, and breaks can be taken?
- Is suitable IT and network equipment provided to promote home working where appropriate?

### 3. Evaluate the risks

The results from Step 2, along with the *HSE Stress Management Standards (2017)*, should be used by the working group to help

decide what to do next. This should involve identifying hot spots and priority areas, determining how to address the gap between current performance and the 'states to be achieved' within the *HSE Stress Management Standards* (2017).

Encourage your employer to involve employees and their representatives in discussions, as they are often the ones closest to the issues and best placed to suggest improvements. A good way to consult is through focus groups – the number of groups will depend on things like the size and structure of the organisation, available resources and the results of the data analysis from Step 2. The HSE's *Talking Toolkit: Preventing Work-related Stress* (HSE, 2021) can be used by your employer to help to structure the focus group conversations around the *HSE Stress Management Standards* (2017) framework.

The culture in your workplace may impact on how willing staff would be to take part in focus groups if managers were involved. Some employers might look to have these sessions lead by the Learning and

Development or Occupational Health teams. A lot of reassurances may need to be provided to members, with clear commitments on anonymity and confidentiality.

#### **4. Record the main findings**

By now the organisation should be developing a clear picture of the scale and spread of any work-related stress issues in your workplace. It is essential that this information is accurately recorded and used as a basic reference point. Your employer should be informing others of the findings on work-related stress issues in the workplace and working with them to form possible solutions.

You and your trade union colleagues should be able to access the data and use it as a checklist against which to monitor the activities of the organisation as they develop their stress management programme. Ensure that the management of work-related stress (and other identified risk factors) is a regular item on the Health and Safety Committee agenda, or whatever group is responsible



for the management of health and safety in your organisation.

Implementation is where the problems often lie. Employers may see that the problem is because of workload or staffing levels and simply walk away. You need to make sure this does not happen by having involved your membership throughout the process and being sure that information has been made available at every stage.

## 5. Monitor and review

- Have control measures been implemented properly?
- Are they working effectively?
- Are they still valid?
- Has anything changed?
- Are there any new issues?
- When do you next review the data?

Your employer should be looking at monitoring progress using trend data and reporting into H&S Committee. Staff side/trade union representation would normally be included so that it is possible for trade union reps to be sighted on what progress is being made and where.

## Recognising the signs of stress

It is not your role to diagnose stress in others. However, you may be in a position to help a member recognise the impact that work is having on their health and wellbeing. Signs of stress can be physical and behavioural and can also be related to thoughts and feelings.

Fig 2: Stress signs and symptoms



You may observe some of the behaviours and patterns above in how members are presenting to you that could indicate that they are experiencing work-related stress. Sometimes it can be easier to use a picture to help members to describe how they are feeling about their situation. The *Jelly baby tree tool* can be used to support members to self-identify how they are feeling if they are having difficulty acknowledging or describing the impact of their work on their wellbeing.

## Supporting individual members

When a member comes to you and reports or exhibits any levels of stress, they may think that they are alone in feeling that way and may believe that they are responsible for putting it right. In your conversation with them there are some top tips for you to remember:

### Top tips



- Ensure the member understands the purpose and scope of your role.
- Ensure you are in an appropriate environment where you can talk over concerns and contributing workplace stressors.
- Actively listen to and acknowledge their feelings and concerns, taking in their body language, tone of voice, silences etc.
- Clarify what you can do for the member – such as giving them time to talk over their concerns and identify contributing workplace stressors, information giving or signposting to workplace and RCN/external resources.
- If the member has a meeting with their manager, ask what their expectations are of the meeting/ what outcome they are hoping for.
- Help them to prepare for the meeting, ensuring that the focus is on changes the manager can make and support that should be provided.

- You can use the framework of the six HSE risk factors in the related *indicator tool*, to help the member identify stressors within their work system.
- Signpost the rep to relevant workplace policies that set out your employer's approach to supporting staff who are experiencing work-related stress.
- If the member is off work, they may need your support to access employer policies and resources.
- Encourage the member to contact their occupational health/employee wellbeing team to access support provided by the employer, such as counselling/resources and to check out what is available through their RCN membership, for example, RCN Counselling, Financial Wellbeing and Welfare Services.
- If a member presents to you at crisis point, they should be signposted to RCND (where advisors are specially trained to triage for RCN counselling services). You could also work with the member to think about who they could reach out to from their support network of family/friends, or their GP.

## Supporting groups of members

In your role as a representative, you may become aware of work areas where groups of members are reporting high levels of work-related stress. This is very likely to be the case where the employer is not delivering on their responsibility to identify and address some, or all, of the HSE risk factors. You may also pro-actively identify areas with high levels of work-related stress through incident reporting/sickness data.

You can support members to raise their issues with the employer, drawing on support from other unions/staff side as appropriate. Here are some top tips for you to remember when supporting groups of members around work-related stress.

## Top tips



- If members come to you with concerns about work-related stress, ask if they have other colleagues who are feeling the same and if they have talked to them.
- Check with members what they are prepared to do to take the issue forward with their employer. Are they happy to call a meeting with other members?
- Gather data to help members to make their case with the employer. This could be from a member survey or organisational data around sickness absence/ exit interviews. Don't forget that if you are a safety rep you have a legal entitlement to workplace data around health and safety under the *Safety Representatives and Safety Committee Regulations 1977/Brown Book*.
- You can use the framework of the six HSE risk factors to help members identify stressors within their work system, using the related *indicator tool*.
- Use your connections with members across the organisation to discover the extent of the issues – how widely these effects are being felt.
- Work with reps from other unions where they are supporting their members on the same issue.
- Support members to identify who they need to influence and how to represent their issues in the appropriate forum. This could include linking with other members in their local RCN branch to build momentum.
- Consider calling a meeting with key decision makers to provide an opportunity for them to hear from groups of members about their experiences.
- Encourage members to raise the issues through the employer's local reporting systems as well as in their supervision conversations to develop a collective evidence base.
- Use your contact with the employer to raise the issue of work-related stress and their legal duties and responsibilities.
- If you are supporting members in a collective meeting with

your employer, you may need to introduce some initial points to help members to feel confident to speak – but try to encourage them to speak on their own behalf as much as possible.

- Think about whether members would benefit from a learning event around the stress management standards or how to identify stress/PTSD. You can help your employer to design to event and source expert speakers and can provide the introductory and concluding remarks to ensure that everyone is clear about context and responsibilities.

## How are you doing?

Sometimes as a rep it can be easy to become focussed on your members' issues and challenges at the expense of your own self-care. Taking the time to think about how you are doing, and what support you might need in your role, can be time well spent.

If you are experiencing symptoms of stress, and you believe that your work is contributing, you can

use the framework of the six HSE risk factors to help you to identify the stressors within your work system. Raise any issues relating to your rep role in your supervision conversation with your RCN officer to start a conversation about what support you might need and what is available to help you. You might find it helpful to complete this *HSE indicator tool* before your conversation with your supervising officer.

Try to be honest with your supervising officer when they ask how you are doing. We can only improve the way we support reps who are struggling with stress if you are open about how aspects of the role and our expectations of you are impacting on your wellbeing. Remember, all RCN services available to members are also available to you.

## Managing members' expectations

It is important that you manage members' expectations and are clear from the outset about what they can expect from you and the boundaries that you operate within.

### Top tips



- Decide what your boundaries are and when you will be available. For example, when will you switch your phone on/off? Communicate this clearly with members from the outset and stick to it.
- Try to be clear about how much time you have when you meet with members. You can always meet again if everything cannot be covered in that first meeting.
- Ending meetings can be tricky. It can be helpful to do so by asking 'What are you planning to do next?' or 'Where do you have to be now?'
- If members are very upset, be mindful of advising them to pause and maybe have some time to settle before they drive or go into a pressured situation if possible.
- Agree your preferred methods of communication such as text, email, telephone, etc.
- Keep communication lines open and members updated.
- Check with the member what their expectations are of you. Only promise what you can deliver. Be realistic about what can be achieved. You are not superhuman.
- If your contact with the member is being identified as a formal case, you can use the RCN's *On the Case* leaflet which sets out their rights as a member and your rights as an RCN representative.
- Be clear with the member about next steps in their case. It is very useful to back this up in writing to them as well (in email if appropriate) as distressed members often have difficulty in retaining and recalling advice and information.
- Document the conversation and inform your RCN supervisor at the soonest opportunity.
- Seek support for yourself from your supervisor and/or RCN counselling services.

## Managing unacceptable behaviour

While we recognise that members can be experiencing high levels of stress and/or be very unwell when they contact you about work-related stress, unacceptable behaviour towards you will not and should not be tolerated.

The RCN has produced *Managing Unacceptable Behaviour: Guidelines for accredited representatives and relevant RCN staff*. If you feel that a member's behaviour has become unacceptable and no longer falls within the RCN *Respect Charter*, contact your supervising officer and consider completing the reporting unacceptable behaviour form on the RCN Reps Hub.

Regular supervision meetings provide a space for you to raise any worries or concerns with your RCN officer. You should always feel that you can ask for help or support.

## Working with your employer and other reps

Partnership working with other unions and management is something the RCN actively supports and promotes, however it is not without its challenges. Sometimes relationships can be strained particularly where all parties are already working under a great deal of pressure. Partnership working does not mean that you cannot have disagreements with employers or that RCN representatives have to say yes to everything management proposes, it means that the RCN approach is to always try to work with management for the benefit of RCN members and patient care.

Sometimes the RCN is in direct competition with other unions for members and this can impact on working relationships. Open, transparent and respectful relationships with other unions as well as management is to be encouraged as we are often working towards the same goals, particularly when it comes to the health and wellbeing of our members.

## Top tips



- Make time for staff-side/trade union pre-meetings or regular catch ups so that you can prepare and agree a joint line and foster positive relationships. Acknowledge that you may be in competition for members but agree to work collectively when faced with management challenges.
- If new to a representative role, shadow an experienced representative at a partnership forum such as the Joint Negotiating and Consultative Committee (JNCC) or Health and Safety Committee.
- Develop, agree and document partnership working arrangements and principles between staff side/trade union and management (ensure your terms of reference are up-to-date and relevant).
- Take up opportunities to develop your skills in areas such as chairing meetings or committee

- work, whether these are offered by the RCN or by your employer.
- Seek support at an early stage when encountering difficulties to either prevent an escalation or to get timely help.
- You can escalate an issue with another trade union rep through the staff side chair (or equivalent workplace representative forum). Your staff side constitution should have guidelines on acceptable behaviours. Your employer policies on acceptable behaviours will also apply.
- If relationships become difficult (either with your trade union colleagues or with management) discuss during RCN supervision and support meetings. Your officer can work with their counterpart from the other union(s) to try to broker a resolution.
- Particularly in relation to addressing work-related stress, all reps regardless of which trade union they are affiliated to will have the same goal and that is to improve the working lives of their members.



## Making time for your activity

Difficulty in getting facilities time is a common frustration identified by representatives and is a particular challenge for representatives who work in frontline clinical roles where the pressure of juggling the two can become too much. Securing a good facilities agreement is key, however, where facilities agreements detailing reasonable time to carry out trade union activities exist, they are often blocked.

### Top tips



- Raise with senior managers and/or human resources staff where a lack of facilities time is preventing you from carrying out your representative role.
- Keep a record of time worked outside paid hours – where this has been unavoidable you have a right to claim time back.
- Do not sign off on your employer's facilities time reports if the hours they claim to have made available

- have not been provided.
- If you are refused a time off request that you consider reasonable put your case in writing to the manager concerned (refer to the law, ACAS and internal agreements). If time off is still refused, ask the manager concerned to put the reasons in writing.
- Discuss concerns about a lack of facilities time and any subsequent case load pressures during RCN supervision and support meetings.
- Think about recruiting different types of representatives so there is a good balance of stewards, safety representatives and learning representatives in the workplace.
- Think about how you can work as a team with other representatives in your workplace to share the workload. For example, a safety representative may be able to support the development of a dignity policy or assist with a consultation on shift work. Equally, a learning representative may be able to support a member who is returning from long-term

sickness or redeployment to identify learning needs.

- Build in ways to de-stress at RCN meetings such as sharing workplace problems at branch meetings, pairing up with an RCN rep buddy.
- Take steps to try and reduce your stress – don't say yes to everything, work within your spheres of control.
- Be mindful about the potential impact of social media
- Make sure to schedule and commit to regular supervision sessions with your office.

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