



Advice on how to overcome  
work-related stress

Occupational therapy  
*Helping you to live life your way*

Work-related stress is the second biggest cause of absenteeism from work. In 2005 420, 000 people in Britain experienced work-related stress that made them ill.\*



## What is stress?

Stress is defined as "...the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demands placed on them".\*

## Pressure versus stress

You will often find pressure in your work, and sometimes this pressure can have a positive effect on your performance - providing you with a buzz, a challenge and a motivation to succeed – so pressure is not all bad! However, when it becomes excessive, pressure can trigger physical and emotional health problems which can lead to work-related stress. This type of stress is not positive and can sometimes undermine performance.

Work-related stress is not an illness, but may act as a pre-cursor to other more serious health problems. Mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, or physical conditions including heart disease, back pain and digestion problems may occur if stress continues over a long period of time.

## Causes of work-related stress

Reduced timescales...tight deadlines...heavy workload...  
multi-tasking...lack of resources...outdated equipment...  
shortage of staff...tough targets...budget cuts...

\* Health and Safety Executive

## How can occupational therapy help you with work-related stress?

Occupational therapists are registered professionals who can help you by using different strategies to reduce your stress levels to improve your work performance. An occupational therapist will teach you to develop relaxation and time management skills, as well as setting priorities and delegation techniques.

## Can my employer ignore the effects of stress?

Your employer has a duty to staff under health and safety law to assess and take measures to control any risks from employees who may be experiencing work-related stress. If your employer is found to be negligent, legal redress could be sought.



## How stressed are you? Find out here...

The following table offers general guidance on how to spot the symptoms. For more information on stress, you may wish to contact your GP.

	Symptoms	What you can do about it
mild stress	<b>Are you:</b>	<b>Through self-help you should:</b>
	Feeling pressured?	Be clear about what is your job and what isn't - get a job description
	Finding it difficult to focus on your daily work activities?	Take regular breaks and time out
	Experiencing no joy or fun being at work?	Have boundaries at work - say no, have lunch, and leave on time
	Critical and hostile towards other staff members and your employer?	Find someone to talk to and cultivate social networks
	Unwilling to get involved in new projects?	Resist perfectionism
	Complaining more?	Plan your day and stick to the schedule
	Suffering headaches?	Think positively and avoid negative co-workers
	Easily irritated?	Use humour to de-stress
	Feeling a sense of being overwhelmed?	Avoid caffeine, sugar and smoking Have regular exercise periods and enjoyable leisure pursuits outside work

## moderate stress

### Symptoms

#### Are you:

- Working longer hours?
- Not taking lunch breaks?
- Finding it difficult to laugh at work?
- Experiencing a shortened attention span?
- Having difficulties being flexible and dealing with change?
- Worrying about work when not there?
- Only seeing the negative viewpoint?
- Expressing a desire to escape or run away?
- Experiencing muscle tension and pain?

### What you can do about it

#### An occupational therapist can support you by teaching:

- Ways of developing self-help strategies. This could include keeping a stress journal to help you recognise what triggers your stress
- A healthy work-life balance and routine including good sleeping habits, as well as a balanced diet and exercise programme
- Relaxation techniques such as slowing your breathing, progressive muscular relaxation, visualisation and meditation
- Time management and prioritising techniques
- Goal-setting to break tasks down into realistic, manageable chunks
- Positive thinking and addressing negative thoughts e.g. all or nothing
- Assertion techniques to say 'no', maintain boundaries, delegate, express concerns and build social networks

## severe stress

### Symptoms

#### Are you:

- Feeling a sense of detachment and disengagement with work?
- Experiencing emotional blunting to situations and colleagues and feeling over-emotional and irritable?
- Feeling demoralised and overwhelmed?
- Paranoid and suspicious of work colleagues?
- Sensing your work colleagues avoid being with you?
- Suffering depression?
- Isolating yourself from others?
- Experiencing memory problems?
- Suffering from chest pain, irregular heartbeats, high blood pressure and stomach ulcers?
- Avoiding going to work?

### What you can do about it

#### An occupational therapist will help you by:

- Entering negotiations with your employer over changes to work conditions, reviewing workload, hours, time off work and gradual return to employment
- Offering stress management programmes for all your work colleagues
- Encouraging organisation changes that cultivate a friendly, social atmosphere
- Referring you for further specialist help – for physical and psychological health checks, medication for anxiety, depression and paranoia, talking therapies and cognitive-behavioural therapy
- Facilitating a meaningful and balanced lifestyle, including relaxing hobbies such as yoga or tai chi
- Enabling you to decide whether you wish to stay in your job or seek alternative employment



## How an occupational therapist can make a difference

Occupational therapists help people of all ages who have physical, mental or social problems as a result of accident, illness or ageing, to do the things they want to do. This could be daily activities that many of us take for granted, for example, getting dressed or having a shower, to going to work, or undertaking a favourite hobby.

## Many people have benefited from occupational therapy

The support and advice given by occupational therapists is wide ranging. Examples include:


- Adapting a knife for someone who has lost hand dexterity
- Helping a child with limited mobility to get dressed
- Advising adjustments in the workplace to help people return to work
- Setting goals and coping strategies to enable people with depression regain confidence and self-esteem
- Enabling older people to remain in their own homes by providing adaptations and equipment

## How to contact an occupational therapist?

- Ask your GP for a referral
- Contact your local primary care trust, social services department or health service provider
- See an independent occupational therapist privately
- Talk to your employer to see if your organisation can refer you to an occupational therapist.

## Contact an occupational therapist in your area

Visit [www.cot.org.uk/stress](http://www.cot.org.uk/stress)



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