

Policy for the Prevention and Management of Work-Related Stress

Definition of Stress

The University accepts the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) definition of stress. Currently, the HSE states..

"We define work-related stress as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them'.

This makes an important distinction between the beneficial effects of reasonable pressure and challenge (which can be stimulating, motivating, and can give a 'buzz') and work-related stress, which is the natural but distressing reaction to demands or 'pressures' that the person perceives they cannot cope with at a given time.

Who experiences work-related stress? Everyone can, in principle. No-one is immune. Work-related stress exists where people perceive they cannot cope with what is being asked of them at work. It is important to remember that work-related stress is not an illness, but if it is prolonged or particularly intense, it can lead to increased problems with ill health." [HSE, *Tackling Work-related Stress: A manager's guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being*, 2001]

Responsibilities of the University: A Policy Statement

The University recognises that its staff are its most valuable asset, and that only through their personal and professional development - in a healthy and safe working environment - can they be encouraged to contribute fully to the life of the University in the achievement of its strategic aims. What follows is an attempt to outline the nature of work-related stress, and consider ways in which Aston University may respond. This policy and accompanying guidance was approved by Council on 15th May 2002, but it is not incorporated into individual contracts of employment or otherwise binding.

Whilst the University has no control over external factors, as a good employer it wishes to promote the physical, psychological and social well-being of all its employees. It is committed to ensuring, so far as is reasonably practicable, that no member of staff is subjected to an excessive and sustained level of reasonably foreseeable work-related stress that is detrimental to their health. Employees suffering from excessive and sustained levels of work related stress will be treated in accordance with the Policy, Code of Practice and Guidelines on Equal Opportunities in Employment and appropriate related present and future policies. The needs of people with disabilities will be given particular consideration.

Objectives of the Policy

The University aims to help understand the phenomenon of work-related stress and put in place both preventative and reactive measures including:

- promoting a culture of encouragement, participation and open communication.
- increasing awareness of the phenomenon of work-related stress and the methods available to combat this.
- assisting staff in managing stress in themselves and others
- providing appropriate and confidential support for those who are experiencing stress.

Responsibilities of all Employees

Employees have a responsibility to take reasonably practicable steps to minimise their own stress levels and those of their fellow workers who may be affected by their acts or omissions. They also have a legal responsibility to comply with the Health and Safety at Work legislation and other statutory regulations to take reasonable care of their health and safety and that of other persons with whom they work. Employees should, therefore, draw the attention of the University to any concerns about work-related stress which might present a health hazard to themselves or other

persons (see the section on what to do if you believe you may be experiencing work related stress).

Responsibilities of Managerial or Supervisory Staff

In order to enable managers and supervisors to fulfil their responsibilities in respect of instances of excessive and sustained work-related stress which are brought to their attention, they will receive information about, and training in, the basic physical and psychological symptoms of stress (as referred to in the Guidance for Managers and Supervisors in Relation to the Care of Staff) in order to take appropriate and reasonable action to avert this. The manager or supervisor is neither expected nor presumed to have specialist knowledge in this area and should seek assistance accordingly.

Risk Assessment

There are difficulties in undertaking risk assessments in respect of work-related stress. In *Tackling Work-related Stress* the HSE states: "One of the key goals of the work-related stress policy and guidance is to promote advice for all staff in identifying the main risk factors". The Guidance for Managers and Supervisors in Relation to the Care of Staff which should be read in conjunction with the University Policy, is provided for this purpose.

What to do if You Believe You May be Experiencing Work Related Stress

There are many things which you can do to relieve the symptoms of stress. A leaflet produced by the Health & Safety Executive outlines some of them. A copy of this leaflet is available by contacting the Health & Safety Office. If none of these measures are effective or appropriate in your situation, the following steps should be taken:

1. If you notice symptoms of stress in yourself or experience any health issues which affect your work, you should consider discussing this with your manager or supervisor in the first instance. If you decide that this is not appropriate, or you feel that the matter requires additional professional guidance, you should contact Human Resources who may, depending upon circumstances, suggest that you be assessed by the University Occupational Health Physician (OHP).
2. The involvement of the Occupational Health Physician at an early stage can help facilitate the co-ordination of communication between the University and your own General Practitioner as well as providing advice as regards future management.
3. If you consult the Occupational Health Physician a report will be sent to Human Resources. You have a right to view, comment on but not amend the report prior to it being sent to the University.
4. The release of medical information from your general practitioner requires your specific consent in accordance with the Access to Medical Records Act 1988.

Procedure for Handling Cases of Work Related Stress

1. When it is brought to the attention of a manager or supervisor that a member of staff has symptoms of stress, including frequent short-term absences, which is affecting their work, there should be a joint discussion with the person concerned in the first instance.
2. If both the manager or supervisor and the member of staff consider that the matter requires additional professional guidance, reference should also be made to Human Resources who may, depending upon circumstances, suggest to the staff member that they be assessed by the University Occupational Health Physician (OHP).
3. Wherever reasonably practicable, an employee experiencing excessive and sustained work-related stress will have their work adapted, including the possibility of alternative employment within the University, so as to remove the risk or reduce it to an acceptable level. A joint strategy will be agreed with the person concerned, their manager or supervisor, Human Resources and the OHP as appropriate. If there is no suitable alternative employment within the University which would not involve the risk of reasonably foreseeably exacerbating their condition, an employee should recognise that, ultimately, it may be necessary, for sufficient reason, to terminate their employment.
4. Managers or supervisors must keep records of the advice and action they have taken in relation to an employee suffering from work-related stress. In accordance with the Data

Protection Act, the employee has the right to access such information. Progress should be recorded, monitored and reviewed appropriately.

The Policy in Practice: Monitoring and Evaluation

As with the Equal Opportunities Policy, the University Council will have overall responsibility for determining the Work-related Stress Policy. Similarly, the formulation and implementation of the policy will be delegated to the Secretary-Registrar, supported by other appropriate senior officers of the University.

A member of Human Resources will be given responsibility for advising the University's senior management, and other appropriate administrative and academic staff and committees of the University, on matters of work-related stress and for producing an annual report for the Council in conjunction with the Health & Safety Consultative Committee.

Each employee of the University will be issued with a copy of the University's Policy on Work-related Stress and Guidance and all new staff will be briefed on it as part of their induction. Every staff member will be made aware of his or her individual responsibility to ensure that the policy is effective. The development and dissemination of good practice, the recognition of the symptoms of stress, and the raising of university-wide awareness of work-related stress will be monitored through Human Resources in conjunction with the Centre for Staff Development. Training and development opportunities will reflect the University's Policy on Work-related Stress.

The Work-related Stress Policy will be monitored and reviewed on a regular basis not exceeding three years to identify trends, the need for training and areas where change or improvements to policies or procedures may be needed.

POLICY FOR THE PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT OF WORK-RELATED STRESS

GUIDANCE FOR MANAGERS & SUPERVISORS IN RELATION TO THE CARE OF STAFF

The information contained in the Guidance for Managers and Supervisors should be read in conjunction with the Work-related Stress Prevention and Management Policy. This Guidance is intended to assist managers and supervisors in fulfilling their workplace responsibilities.

Effects of Stress

While each individual's response to stressors is unique, some common symptoms are discernible:

- Behavioural - withdrawal, hostility, excessive eating, drinking or smoking, poor concentration, being too busy to relax, absenteeism;
- Emotional - loss of confidence, lack of self esteem, anxiety, frustration, anger, apathy;
- Physical - difficulties in sleeping, frequent and unspecified aches and pains, digestive problems.

Displaying some of these symptoms does not automatically indicate that a person is experiencing stress, but they point to such a possibility.

Signs of Stress in the Workplace

An individual's stress can be detrimental to him- or her-self and also adversely affect the efficiency, image and costs of an area or School; the knock-on effect on other staff, and on students can be considerable and can, in turn, increase their stress levels. Morale and health tend to suffer, resulting in inefficiency, poor relationships, sickness absences, and high staff turnover.

In general, potentially harmful levels of stress are most likely to occur in the following circumstances: when pressures or stressors accumulate or are prolonged; when individuals perceive themselves as being unable to exert any control over the demands that are placed upon them, and/or are left feeling confused by conflicting demands that are made upon them. Some of the common symptoms of stress problems in an organisation include: inferior work performance, loss of motivation and commitment, tense relationships at work and increased sickness absence.

Responsibilities of Managerial or Supervisory Staff

All employees can contribute significantly to maintaining a positive workplace culture. This is especially true of those in a managerial or supervisory role who can display a leadership style which encourages their colleagues to discuss feelings of stress without the stigma of this being interpreted as a sign of weakness or failure. The responsibilities of managerial and supervisory staff are set out in the University Policy. Please refer to the Procedure for Handling Cases of Work Related Stress above.

Wherever reasonably practicable, an employee experiencing excessive and sustained work-related stress will have their work adapted, including the possibility of alternative employment within the University, so as to remove the risk or reduce it to an acceptable level. A joint strategy will be agreed with the person concerned, their manager or supervisor, the OHP and Human Resources as appropriate.

It is essential that managers or supervisory staff keep records of the advice and action they have taken in relation to an employee suffering from work-related stress. In accordance with the Data Protection Act, the employee has the right to access such information. Progress should be recorded, monitored and reviewed appropriately.

A SUPPORTIVE WORKING ENVIRONMENT CAN BE PROVIDED BY:

Leadership Style:

- Dealing with staff in a sensitive and caring fashion.
- Monitoring of staff satisfaction and well-being on a regular basis.

- Ensuring that all staff know whom to talk to about problems.
- Fostering a team approach and good relationships between members of staff.

Communication:

- Having regular two-way communication with staff, not only at formal meetings - making sure there is also an opportunity for informal discussion.
- Communicating and discussing team objectives.
- Recognising and praising individual or group achievements; hard work and efforts.
- Giving support and providing constructive criticism when required; making opportunities for staff to discuss their concerns. Listening sympathetically and taking appropriate action.
- Assessing the impact that your actions and decisions have on the staff for whom you have responsibility, e.g., prepare staff for proposed changes in staffing levels, work tasks and responsibilities.

Work and work design:

- Setting out clear roles and responsibilities for your staff which they understand and which they can work to.
- Regular reviewing of known work pressures such as excessive workload, tight deadlines, staffing levels, and the need for staff skills development.
- Identifying jobs where stress has been or is a problem and seeing what can be done to reduce the risk of stress to jobholders.
- Ensuring that instructions and requests to staff are clear and are not conflicting.
- Allowing flexible work schedules when this is reasonably practicable.

CURRENT UNIVERSITY RESOURCES TO SUPPORT INDIVIDUALS WHO MAY BE EXPERIENCING WORK-RELATED STRESS INCLUDE:

Human Resources; Organisational Development; the Counselling Service; the Health Centre; the University Chaplaincy; the Trade Unions; the University Sport and Recreation Facilities.

Other sources of help can be provided by a person's own general practitioner who may be able to arrange counselling through the NHS and a range of organisations including: the British Association of Counselling; CRUSE Bereavement Care; Relate (Couple Counselling); the Samaritans.

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