

## Stress @ work

### Work Stress: A growing problem in today's workplace

Dr Gillian Hale

Everyone experiences some degree of [stress at work](#), and a degree of positive pressure can help improve performance and productivity. But in a recent report,<sup>1</sup> the leading mental health charity, Mind, warned that excessive levels or prolonged periods of stress can have adverse effects resulting in both physical and mental illness.

The report lists a number of disturbing facts about stress in the workplace:

- More than 5 million people complain of extreme stress in their jobs, putting them at risk of a breakdown.
- In a recent Health and Safety Executive (HSE) report on **work-related stress**, 20% of those questioned reported that their work was “very stressful” or “extremely stressful”.<sup>2</sup>
- Nearly 10% of the UK's gross national product (GNP) is lost each year due to **work-related stress**.
- Stress is the highest cause of absenteeism from work among non-manual employees.
- An estimated 12.8 million working days were lost in Britain in 2003/4 as a result of **work-related stress**.<sup>3</sup>

The report identified a number of factors that can increase **stress at work**, including:

- poor working conditions (e.g. long hours, travel, noises, smells, work overload and work underload)
- a lack of a clear role in the company (e.g. ill-defined expectations, conflicting priorities and responsibility for others)
- poor relationships at work (e.g. low levels of trust and lack of support).

At the end of 2004, the HSE launched a new guide for managers, aimed at preventing **stress in the workplace**.<sup>4</sup> The guide identified 12 management standards, providing a step-by-step approach to tackling the different causes of stress in the workplace, together with advice on identifying those at risk from stress and on how to prevent problems occurring.

The Mind report supports these standards, recommending that all organisations should have a stress prevention policy that lays down the way the organisation deals with stress issues.

The reports' key recommendations to reduce/prevent stress at work include the following:

- Employees should have genuine control over their work and be allowed an appropriate degree of self-management of workload.
- Roles, responsibilities and expectations should be fully defined.
- Employees should have a role in planning and decision making.
- The physical workplace environment should be of a high standard, including natural light where possible, good ventilation, and good health and safety practices.
- Employees should be actively discouraged from working excessively long hours.

For those who have been made ill through **stress at work**, the report recommends that:

- on-the-job support and mentoring schemes should be provided
- flexible hours should be introduced to take account of regular GP/hospital visits
- those who have had to take time off after illness should be allowed to return to work gradually
- positions should be kept open during sickness absence.

The HSE report states that employers now have a duty in law to ensure that their employees do not suffer from stress-related illness. Employers who do

not take **work-related stress** seriously may therefore leave themselves open to compensation claims from employees who have suffered ill health from work-related stress.

## References

1. *Stress and Mental Health in the Workplace*. <http://www.mind.org.uk>
2. *The Scale of Occupational Stress: The Bristol Stress and Health at Work Study*. HSE Contract Research Report 265, HSE Books (2000).
3. Health and Safety Executive (2004). *Health and Safety Statistics Highlights 2003/04*. Available at [www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/overpic.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/overpic.htm)
4. *Tackling Work-Related Stress: A Managers' Guide To Improving And Maintaining Employee Health And Well-Being*  
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/information.htm>

For more information on stress at work and essential oils, visit:

<http://www.aromatherapy-stress-relief.com/stressatwork.html>

**Dr Gillian Hale** is co-founder of [Aromatherapy-stress-relief.com](http://www.aromatherapy-stress-relief.com), a home based UK business providing Aromatherapy Stress Relief Gifts.

copyright © 2005 CUS Busting Ltd