



## HSE Management Standards on Work-related Stress

### *A Guide for Safety Representatives*

#### **Introduction**

Workplace stress has been viewed as a major problem by trade unions since the 1980's. It is due in part to work by unions that stress is now recognised as one of the main ill health concern in the workplace. Unfortunately while many employers have accepted that stress is a major problem in their workplace, few have any idea how to tackle it effectively.

There is now clear guidance available from the HSE, which will help organisations identify practical solutions to the problem. These are the Management Standards for Work-related Stress which build on the existing HSE guidance booklet "tackling work-related stress".

Amicus believes that every safety representative should encourage their employer to implement these standards in their organisation. Amicus reps have a major part to play in ensuring that the employer takes their responsibilities to tackle work-related stress seriously. Dealing with stress at work highlights the fact that health and safety is not divorced from the rest of a union's industrial activity. Unions and employers working together to invest in health and safety can result in a vast improvement in other aspects of industrial relations and a working environment in which stress is managed properly.

This guide is to help Amicus safety reps encourage their employer to work with them to implement the HSE standards on managing stress at work. The standards were launched in 2004 following extensive development and piloting. They are an effective tool to assist organisations to identify the causes of workplace stress and implement practical solutions to manage the risks. They are now the main standard in use in the UK.

This guide gives:

- A background to the problem of stress;
- Outlines what the standards are;
- Says what you and your employer must do;
- Explains the process;
- Tells you where to go for additional information.

#### **Background**

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) define stress as "**the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them**". This definition is widely accepted.

We all recognise that a certain degree of pressure is part and parcel of all work and helps to keep us motivated. However excessive pressure can lead to stress that undermines performance, is costly to employers and can lead to ill health. HSE commissioned research indicates that about half a million people in the UK experience work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill. It also shows that work-related stress costs society about £3.7 billion every year (at 1995/6 prices). Stress continues to be a major workplace issue for Amicus safety reps and members. This was borne out, yet again, by the 2004 TUC biennial survey.

58% of the 5,800 safety reps who responded to the survey said that stress was the main hazard of concern to workers. Overwork or stress was 18% higher than the next most frequently cited hazard, repetitive strain injuries

(40%). The picture is similar for all sizes of workplace, different regions/countries and most economic sectors. To identify the causes of overwork or stress, the TUC survey asked safety reps to identify what were the major stress factors or problems at their workplaces. The results are in Table 1 below

**Table 1 - Factors linked to overwork or stress**

Factor	Problem issues 2004 survey	Problem issues 2002 survey	Problem issues 2000 survey	Problem issues 1998 survey
Workloads	79%	80%	74%	60%
Cuts in staff	49%	50%	53%	60%
Change	47%	52%	44%	no equivalent
Long hours	37%	41%	39%	28%
Bullying	27%	28%	30%	21%
Shiftwork	22%	22%	30%	22%
Cramped working conditions	17%	19%	16%	14%
Redundancies	14%	12%	17%	15%
Sex or racial harassment	3%	4%	6%	5%

Trade Unions have been campaigning for specific legislation to make risk assessment for stress a legal duty on employers but to date that has not happened. However, the HSE agrees with the TUC, and Amicus, that work-related stress should be treated as any other workplace hazard. It also emphasises that it is subject to risk assessment as required by the Management of Health and Safety Regulations 1999. To assist with this process, HSE has developed Management Standards to assist employers in carrying out this duty.

### **The Health and Safety Executive Management Standards for Work-related stress**

The Management Standards and accompanying guidance have been designed to assist employers in identifying causes of stress in the workplace and develop and implement solutions to minimise the effects on workers. Amicus has welcomed this development as it gives real support to employers wishing to tackle stress at work. The standards also give health and safety enforcement officers a means of assessing whether an employer is failing to manage stress.

Amicus wants the standards to be used to enforce the Management of Health and Safety Regulations 1999 when employers fail to manage stress at work despite the assistance and advice given in the standards by the HSE. Amicus believes that, in the absence of specific legislation, the HSE's Stress Management Standards are the most effective way of dealing with stress. However it is important that unions are involved in the introduction of the standards at every stage. If employers simply try to introduce them without proper consultation they are unlikely to be effective.

The Standards aim to simplify the risk assessment process and at the same time provide a yardstick by which organisations can gauge their performance in tackling the key causes of stress. The standards classify the principle causes of work-related stress into six key areas:

**Demands** - Includes issues like workload, work patterns, and the work environment

**Control** - How much say the person has in the way they do their work

**Support** - Includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues

**Relationships** - Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

**Role** - Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles

**Change** - How organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation

For each of the following factors the HSE Standards give a state which each employers should aim to achieve:

**Demands** - *Employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs.*

Are members able to deal with workloads and deadlines? It may that the work is dealt with but it is a matter of 'coping' all the time. Is the feeling of being under pressure all the time the general attitude of members or is it just

one or two people? If a general attitude then it is probably an organizational issue. If down to individuals, then it may be that they have not been trained properly and do not have the right skills for the job. This is an example of why a dialogue following the survey is key – it helps identify the local issues and develop practical solutions.

**Control** - *Employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work*

Having established what they do and if they have been trained to do the job, workers need to know how flexible the working arrangements are. Are members able to vary the routine or the way in which the work has to be carried out? For instance this may be because members work on a production line or they are call centre workers and forms have to be completed in a set way or phrases said in a particular format.

**Support** - *Employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors.*

You need to establish that there is a clear line of responsibility or supervision or that the member is clear about the kinds of decisions they can take on their own. Asking if they know who their line supervisor is and whether that person is readily available to give guidance and support would be useful. Is teamwork or communication between colleagues encouraged or does the work set-up prevent this? Do members have time to talk to each other?

**Relationships** - *Employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviour, e.g. bullying at work.*

This follows on from the last heading. Does the work pattern or job set up enable people to build constructive and supportive relationships at work? If you identify problems you may need to negotiate an agreement on dealing with bullying at work. Check if there is a grievance procedure. If there is one, do members think it works? You may need help from your local Amicus official to help set up these discussions or get guidance.

**Role** - *Employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities.*

You need to establish that members are clear as to what their job is and what it is they are expected to do.

**Change** - *Employees indicate that the organisation engages them frequently when undergoing an organisational change.*

Change itself may not be a bad thing. However, it is key that structures are in place so that members are informed and consulted on change, particularly at times of fundamental restructuring when redundancy might be on the cards.

## **The Practicalities – What you and your employer need to do**

The first step for an organisation implementing standards is to set up a group to oversee the stress risk assessment process. This can be the existing safety committee or a group set up specifically for this purpose. There should be union involvement, but it is also important that both HR and occupational health specialists are on the group. The group will be responsible for introducing and implementing the standards.

It is important that the group has realistic timescales and that the organisation is committed to providing the resources necessary to implement the findings of the risk assessment. Tackling stress is not something that can be done overnight, and it will involve both management and safety reps in a long process. That means that Amicus reps must ensure they are given sufficient time off to deal with the additional demands.

Management must also realise that simply using the standards to produce reports will achieve nothing. The process should lead to proposals for change that must be implemented. These can include some quite uncomfortable options in some cases, such as tackling a long hours culture or increasing staffing levels. That is why it is crucial to get commitment from the top. There is no point in starting the process if half way through management backs out because they are not prepared to fund the changes needed. That will just feed the frustration of your members.

Amicus would also recommend that all members of the group receive full training on the standards right from the start, although at some stage all managers and safety reps will need training. A good communications strategy is also key, as the workforce must feel both informed and involved at every stage.

Often the impetus to tackle work-related stress will come from the unions, but the first step is to gather information on the current state of the organisation. The employer is advised to carry out an audit or a survey to establish a

picture of what is happening and to give an overall view of the work place. An indicator tool / questionnaire tapping into the six Management Standard areas can be found on HSE's website at [www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm). This will give an idea of priority areas that may need further discussion.

Using the HSE questionnaire will allow organisations to measure how they are currently performing against the standards. Data from the questionnaire can be fed into an analysis tool which is also available on the HSE website. The analysis tool can be used to indicate possible hot spots and prioritise areas for action. It also sets interim targets for the organisation to aim towards. The questionnaire can be repeated following the implementation of practical controls and progress to achieving the standards can be measured.

Safety reps can also do their own surveys locally to find out the levels of stress and the causes. Amicus and the TUC have produced a simple "Stress MOT" that safety reps can use to find out if there is likely to be a major problem, which can be downloaded from [www.amicustheunion.org/pdf/StressKit.pdf](http://www.amicustheunion.org/pdf/StressKit.pdf).

## The Process

The next step is the Risk Assessment process. Risk assessment is designed to help prevent people being harmed at work, physically or psychologically. If work causes stress, then all the risks - not just the psychological risks - must be assessed. Sometimes this will take you out of straightforward health and safety issues. You may have to deal with employment rights and welfare issues such as job descriptions or parental leave or care for a dependent.

The approach to risk assessment is the same for stress as for other risks. It needs to focus on the causes, not just the effects. But there are different methods that can be used. It is important to get the starting point right. The HSE recommends using the five steps to Risks Assessment that are used for other risks. The Stress Management Standards have been designed to follow the five steps to risk assessment process. Your employer is responsible for carrying this out, although they should consult you at each stage.

### The five steps (along with some examples) are:

#### Step 1. Look for the hazards - what could cause harm and how?

The employer can use the survey results and can also carry out an inspection of the workplace to check for physical sources of stress. For example, under **Demands** they could check to ensure the proper design and installation of machinery to avoid muscular-skeletal problems or RSI. Check on noise levels and vibrations. Even noise levels that do not cause damage to hearing can have a negative effect on the heart and circulatory systems. They can look for toxic chemical or biological hazards that can have an increased risk for stressed workers because of the body's reduced ability to fight off infection. Also they should check on environment issues such as temperature and ventilation and on the lighting conditions. Working in poorly lit rooms without any natural light can be very demanding and sometimes painful on the eyes causing stress-inducing headaches etc. Provision and maintenance of toilets and staff rooms are an indication of managements' regard/respect for staff or staff's opinion of the workplace.

#### Step 2. Identify people at risk who could be harmed, and how? Is anyone particularly vulnerable?

For example under **Support** the employer should have established what lines of supervision exist, but is there an issue of competency of those supervisors? Is there a need for training and if so what kind? This is a good issue to involve learning reps in. Remember also that people may be vulnerable because of what is happening in their life outside of the workplace. In these circumstances the organisation's attitude toward flexible working, carers leave or recognition of staff medical conditions can play a vital role.

#### Step 3. Evaluate the risks

What preventive measures are in place? – Preventive measures are summed up in the Standards. For instance members have some **Control** over their working life or their **Support** includes appropriate training where necessary on a regular basis.

**What else needs to be done?** – Is the information flow sufficient and appropriate? For instance are employees involved, as well as informed, of **Change** in the organisation? Does the organisation have access to personnel or occupational health advice? Many organisations, especially small businesses, may not need such advice in the short-term on a full time basis but as safety rep you could discuss the need for such advice with management and the possible ways this could be provided, including ensuring a close working relationship with the HSE.

**What are the priorities?** – The survey should have given the employer an idea of where the gaps are in the organisations approach to the Standards. They can also use the factor table within the standards as a checklist.

#### **Step 4. Record the main findings (and implement them!)**

By now the organisation should have a story to tell which is packed with information. It is essential that this information is accurately recorded. This will be the basic reference point. The employer will be using it to inform others of the stress issues at the workplace and working with them to form possible solutions.

You and other union officers will be able to use the document, or indeed the set of documents, as a checklist against the activities of the organisation as they develop their stress management programme.

Having collected the information let members know the outcome of your investigation and report the outcomes to your health and safety committee.

Ensure that the implementation of the HSE Standards in your workplace is a regular item on the Health and Safety Committee agenda. Your findings will be an important tool in how management, in discussion with the Committee, carries out their own risk assessment and ensures the HSE standards are met.

The Committee needs to establish a programme of work to implement the Standards. If such a committee does not exist then discussions directly with the employer will be needed. If your employer is uncooperative then call the HSE. The implementation of the standards is a key HSE priority and they can help.

#### **Step 5. Monitor and review the effectiveness of any control measures (revise them if necessary)**

Have control measures been implemented properly?  
Are they working effectively?  
Are they still valid?  
Has anything changed?

This is why keeping a record of your findings is important.

A risk assessment carried out by an organisation is a 'live' document and needs to be kept up to date. Workplaces physically change, the staff change and technology and ways of working change. The stress risk assessment needs to reflect and take account of those changes. Ask yourself if the employers approach to implementing the standards is delivering the intended outcome of preventing and controlling stress at work? Is it answering all the union's concerns you have identified through your survey and assessment?

Unfortunately there is no easy solution to getting your employer to manage stress at work, but the survey, the factor table and the risk assessment, in conjunction with the HSE Standards are tools to point you in the right direction.

#### **Training for safety Reps**

For many reps this may be a new area of work and may need assistance. Amicus safety reps have a right to training. Although you should ask your employer to provide joint training on the standards for both management and safety reps, it is not a substitute for union training.

#### **Amicus Training**

Amicus offers a 3 day course on Stress Management. This course has been developed for experienced safety reps to further develop their skills and knowledge of stress management systems in the workplace. For more

details see [www.amicustheunion.org/safetytraining/](http://www.amicustheunion.org/safetytraining/).

### **Amicus Information on Stress**

Extensive information on stress can be found on the Amicus H&S website at [www.amicustheunion.org/stress/](http://www.amicustheunion.org/stress/)

This includes “Stress – an Amicus guide for members”, available free on the website at [www.amicustheunion.org/pdf/stressguide.pdf](http://www.amicustheunion.org/pdf/stressguide.pdf) (currently being updated to include the Management Standards for Work-related Stress).

### **Other Sources of information**

The Health and Safety Executive stress home page is at [www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm) while the Stress Standards can be found at [www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm). There are a number of free downloads at [www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/downloads.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/downloads.htm)

There is a resource pack from the HSE for employers on dealing with stress entitled *Real Solutions, Real People* (ISBN 0 7176 2767 5). The pack includes *Tackling work-related stress: A managers' guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being* (2001), HSG218, ISBN 0 7176 2050 as well as a leaflet for employees *Tackling work-related stress: A guide for employees* (Leaflet INDG341). The pack is priced £25 although single copies of the employee leaflet are free. A pack of 10 leaflets is £5 and the price reduces the more that are ordered.

HSE priced and free publications are available from HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 2WA Tel: 01787 881165, Fax: 01787 313995. Website: [www.hsebooks.co.uk](http://www.hsebooks.co.uk) (HSE priced publications are also available from bookshops) and free leaflets can be downloaded from HSE's website [www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/leaflets.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/leaflets.htm).

The International Stress Management Association has produced a leaflet showing how employees can work with their employers to tackle work-related stress using the Management Standards approach. The leaflet is supported by HSE, ACAS, TUC and the CIPD - *Working together to reduce stress at work - a guide for employees* and can be found at [www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/pdfs/leaflet.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/pdfs/leaflet.pdf) or can be ordered from ISMA, PO Box 348, Waltham Cross, London, EN8 8ZL – tel: 07000 780430 or visit [www.isma.org.uk](http://www.isma.org.uk).

The TUC publication *Tackling Stress at Work* (£5) is available from TUC Publications at Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LS - 020 7467 1294 [www.tuc.org.uk/publications/index.cfm](http://www.tuc.org.uk/publications/index.cfm),

You can also go to the TUC stress pages at [www.tuc.org.uk/h\\_and\\_s/index.cfm?mins=37](http://www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/index.cfm?mins=37)

You can keep up to date with developments in stress, and other work related health and safety issues, by registering free with the TUC weekly e-magazine **Risks** by going to [www.tuc.org.uk/h\\_and\\_s/index.cfm?mins=242](http://www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/index.cfm?mins=242)

(This information is based on a TUC Safety Reps Guide to the HSE Stress Management Standards, July 2005)