Learn more about stress at work
A resource to support the mental health of adult social care workers
Stress supplement
Stress and workplace performance

Stress works something like this:

1. You are in a situation.
2. The situation becomes difficult.
3. You feel threatened (on whatever level).
4. In response to that feeling of threat, your body automatically releases hormones (chemical messengers) to help you deal with the threat.

What do stress hormones do?
Stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, raise your heart rate, blood pressure and the amount of energy available to your muscles. At the same time, they limit other functions, including digestion and processes to do with growth and reproduction. They also affect brain regions associated with mood, motivation and fear. The amygdala, a part of the brain associated with strong emotion, takes over – at the expense of other parts associated with rational thought. This is known as the amygdala hijack and it’s why people often make poor decisions when stressed.

This process dates from a time when threats required an immediate physical response. Stress hormones help us make that immediate physical response.

Acute stress
This reaction is safe, appropriate and helpful in situations of acute stress: isolated, one-off events such as having to break suddenly to avoid a collision – or something psychologically threatening, such as having to speak in public. A sudden release of stress hormones in those situations can improve our performance. As soon as the threat is over, we relax and the level of stress hormones in our body returns to normal.

It is only when we experience chronic stress that our body’s natural reaction becomes a problem.

What is chronic stress?
Chronic stress is when the level of stress hormones in the body does not return to normal. This happens if you experience too much pressure over an extended period. You feel threatened. Your body releases stress hormones to help you cope. Then, instead of the pressure easing, allowing you to calm down and your stress hormones to return to their normal level, the pressure continues. You go on feeling threatened and your body goes on releasing stress hormones.

1 Source: http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/furtheradvice/whatisstress.htm
Stress hormones interfere with the normal functioning of our body (see above, What do stress hormones do?). Over a prolonged period, this can lead to:

- anxiety
- depression
- digestive problems
- heart disease
- problems with concentration and memory
- sleep problems
- weight gain/loss

and many other physical and psychological problems.

This is how stress, not in itself an illness, causes illness.

Clearly, anyone suffering from chronic stress is highly unlikely to perform at their best.

For more about the physical effects of stress refer to this infographic from the Health and Safety Executive.
What turns a demand into a threat?

Imagine: You go out for a meal in a restaurant. The bill comes – a demand to pay. Fortunately, you’ve got more than enough money. You can meet the demand. The pressure on you to pay is manageable. You experience no stress. Now imagine the same situation, but this time you don’t have enough money. Same demand, but now it’s stressful.

In other words, a situation becomes stressful when you feel unable to meet its demands. Those demands then turn into threats and you no longer feel safe.

Two types of threat

Threats fall into two basic categories: physical and psychological.

- **Physical threats**: Situations where you feel at risk of actual bodily harm can be said to carry a physical threat.
- **Psychological threats**: Situations where you feel your standing in the world – that is, with other people – is at risk can be said to carry a psychological threat, particularly where you have to act in a way inconsistent with your personal values.

Stress is subjective...

What feels threatening to a person depends on a whole range of factors, including the individual’s:

- personality, life history, beliefs, values and general level of confidence and self-esteem
- competence, including attitudes, skills and knowledge
- general perception of events and sense of control
- physical state, their general health, but also things such as tiredness, hydration and nutrition
- psychological state, including what is going on in their life outside work.

Given that, it can be unwise to make assumptions about how stressful someone (yourself included) may find any given situation on any given day.

...but it’s not all in the mind

Stress is a physical reaction with consequences that affect our behaviour (including our thought-processes and our emotional responses) and our health.
Stress factors

While we cannot safely predict how stressful we or anyone else will find a particular situation, we do know quite a lot about the factors that make a situation stressful.

- **Lack of control**: getting the outcome you want from the situation depends on factors such as other people, beyond your control.

- **Lack of familiarity**: the situation is new and you do not know what to expect (e.g. carrying out a task for the first time, meeting new people, getting to a new place).

- **Lack of predictability**: you have been in the situation before, but it contains elements that you cannot predict (e.g. interacting with a moody person – some days they are sweetness and light, other days irritable and aggressive and you have no idea what they’ll be like till you get there).

  Care work involves a great deal of unpredictability, which time pressure can make even more stressful.

- **Lack of confidence**: having to do something that you feel is beyond your ability (or, that has to be done without adequate support) – note that such situations become even more stressful when you feel that other people are judging you according to how well you do the thing.

- **Potential for conflict**: having to do things that others oppose, having to deal with hostile people.

Is there a common thread?

There are two: one, the outcome of the situation matters to us; two, we don’t feel in control. Put those two things together and you might say the common thread is that we don’t feel safe in the situation.

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Empathy: another source of stress at work

Other people’s babies crying, strangers arguing, scary scenes in films even – all sorts of situations that don’t involve us personally still affect us. By its very nature, care work routinely exposes staff to other people’s distress – and asks staff to show empathy and compassion. That’s bound to be stressful – as is working with unhappy colleagues.
Stress and workplace performance

In the words of the Health and Safety Executive,

Well-designed, organised and managed work is generally good for us but when insufficient attention to job design, work organisation and management has taken place, it can result in work-related stress.

What is ‘well-designed work’?

In the past, people believed that keeping jobs as simple as possible was the key to productivity. That led to repetitive, pressurised work, where workers had little or no control over their routines (watch a depiction in the Charlie Chaplin film, *Modern Times*). Not surprisingly, this approach alienated workers and productivity suffered. That led to a serious rethink about job design and its relationship to motivation. Five key features were identified:

1. **skill variety**: the job allows you to use a range of skills
2. **task identity**: the job allows you to achieve clear outcomes (making the work purposeful)
3. **significance**: the job allows you to make a positive impact on the well-being of other people
4. **autonomy**: the job allows you some discretion (i.e. decision-making power) in how you achieve objectives
5. **feedback**: the job provides you with constructive information on the quality of your performance.

These features help ensure that you:

- feel your job is meaningful – and can explain to other people why it is meaningful
- are motivated to take responsibility for the outcomes of your work
- understand what quality means in relation to your work (i.e. recognise the difference between doing the job well and doing it poorly).

That in turn helps you feel good about your work. ³

What is ‘well-organised’ and ‘well-managed’ work?

In a nutshell, work that is well-organised and well-managed ensures that people are able to cope with the demands of their job. That happens when the individuals concerned are competent (i.e. equipped with the skills and knowledge they need), the workload is realistic (i.e. achievable given the available resources and the time allowed) and support is available.

That support includes not only extra hands, but also supervisory feedback: guidance and encouragement, reassurance, recognition and praise.

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² Source: [www.hse.gov.uk/stress/furtheradvice/whatisstress.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/furtheradvice/whatisstress.htm)
³ For more about this, see the Job Characteristics Model (1975), Oldham and Hackman
Pressure is part of healthy work...
A job with no demands would feel meaningless. So long as we can cope, pressure is stimulating and makes work feel more rewarding.

Fall asleep boring
Too little pressure -stressful

Safe, stimulating and meaningful

Out-of-control scary
Too much pressure -stressful

...but it needs to be balanced with support
You perform best when you are fully focused on what you are doing. To focus fully, you need to feel in control. To feel in control, you need to feel safe in the situation, able, in other words, to cope with its demands. You also need to feel what you are doing is worthy of your undivided attention. The right kind of support helps you to feel sufficiently in control of the situation (i.e. able to cope with its demands). It also provides validation that what you are doing is meaningful and valuable to others.

Why pressure-free is stressful too
Jobs that offer little or no challenge typically offer little or no opportunity for decision-making or problem-solving, leaving the worker feeling not only bored, but out-of-control. This combined with feeling undervalued, perhaps invisible even, can make a routine, apparently stress-free, job stressful.

When work is well-designed, well-organised and well-managed, when the right balance is struck between pressure and support, it becomes ‘engaging’.

Employee engagement...
When a person finds their job engrossing, worthwhile and rewarding and also feels valued and supported by their colleagues and by their employer, they are likely to feel committed to their job and motivated to do their best for their employer.
And disengagement

That degree of engagement, however, depends on getting the balance between pressure and support right.

If that goes out of kilter, pressure that was stimulating soon becomes stressful. The person will become progressively more and more disengaged. Beyond a point, they won't be able to cope.

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**Not coping: presenteeism, absenteeism and burnout**

Have you ever turned up for work when you knew you weren't at your best? You struggle through the day. You don’t feel good and you don’t function brilliantly, but at least you are there - in body, at least.

That is **presenteeism** and it is one of the hidden costs of stress at work. Superficially, it’s a case of all present and correct. In fact, the stressed employee is performing poorly. This inevitably impacts on those around them, limiting the performance of their colleagues, which limits the performance of the organisation as a whole. The overall quality of care can only suffer.

After **presenteeism** comes stress-related **absenteeism**, when long-term exposure to stress results in the person feeling they can’t even face coming in to work. Not something to let develop.

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Ultimately, of course, chronic stress leads to burnout, a state of exhaustion that leaves the individual vulnerable to serious mental and physical ill health.

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This work was researched and compiled by Alexander Braddell, working to a commission from Skills for Care. Mr Braddell and Skills for Care gratefully acknowledge the contribution of Michelle Spirit of Spirit Resilience to this work.