

Spotlight on Stress

A Conversation Guide for Managers



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH



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Introduction



The case for preventing stress:

- UK law requires all employers to have arrangements in place to prevent and manage stress.
- Taking action on stress reduces sickness absence, boosts morale and helps improve productivity.
- Tackling stress in the workplace can help prevent the onset of associated ill-health.
- It's the right thing to do.

Who to talk to

This guide refers to the direct line manager as the person to initiate a conversation. It is recognised that this may not always be possible. Conversations can take place with another appropriate manager in some circumstances.

Preventing work-related stress

Across the UK, work-related stress is a major contributor to sickness absence, resulting in a significant number of working days lost each year and affecting large numbers of employees.

Stress affects us all at different times, and in different ways.

It can cause people to feel physically and emotionally unwell, and can make existing mental health conditions worse.

It is important to recognise that an employer or manager is not expected to diagnose or treat stress, regardless of its cause, but they do have a responsibility to provide appropriate support and promote wellbeing in the workplace.

If a staff member is experiencing challenges, it's important that they get help as soon as possible.

The law requires all employers to assess the risk of work-related stress and to put steps in place to address those risks.

Managers play an important role in helping to implement workplace measures that can assist in reducing the risk of undue stress.

This guide is designed to help managers hold initial conversations with staff, as part of the University's arrangements for preventing work-related stress.

By taking action, managers can help create an engaged and healthy workforce.

Employers from all sectors have reported improvements in productivity, retention of staff and a reduction in sickness absence when tackling work-related stress.



- Addressing and discussing workplace challenges early can help reduce their impact.
- If you think a staff member may be experiencing difficulties, encourage them to speak to someone they trust. This could be you as their manager, another manager, Occupational Health, Human Resources or their GP.

Using the Conversation Guide

Starting the conversation is an important first step towards preventing work-related stress.

This Conversation Guide can be used on its own prior to, or in conjunction with, a stress risk assessment and can be followed with a Wellness Action Plan.

It can be used by managers to help start an open, practical conversation with staff.

The guide has six templates for six different conversations.

Each of these templates has a different theme, designed to help support managers and staff to talk about workplace issues. Some of these issues may already be causing stress, or they may have the potential to lead to stress, if not managed properly.

For each conversation, the first section provides managers with a series of questions designed to help initiate open discussions with staff about the potential causes of stress.

The second section helps the manager and staff member to develop ideas for how to begin addressing causes.

There is no strict format for these conversations, or for how managers should conduct them, and the layout of the guide is not prescriptive.

You could consider holding a conversation every three to six months - or perhaps more frequently, when needed. The conversations could focus on just one topic area or cover all six.

The conversations can fit into an existing one-to-one meeting, they could be built into a training day, or a new meeting could be set up solely to talk about stress and how to prevent it.

The University supports and encourages managers and staff to have these conversations.

The guide relies on both managers and staff having open and honest conversations.

Managers should aim to listen to what is being said rather than trying to offer explanations.

Action points and solutions can then be explored and agreed together. The important thing is to start talking and to start planning.

The law requires all employers to assess the risk of work-related stress and to put steps in place to tackle those risks.

This guide forms part of the University's arrangements for the prevention and management of stress but should not be used in isolation.

For guidance on the University's wider arrangements please visit the Health, Safety and Wellbeing Department website.



- Conversation 1 Demands
- Conversation 2 Control
- Conversation 3 Support
- Conversation 4 Relationships
- Conversation 5 Role
- Conversation 6 Change

Next steps



This guide is designed to be one step on the journey towards preventing and managing work-related stress and brings together resources, guidance and supportive measures.

After completing the conversations, it is hoped you will have built up a picture of the potential causes of stress and the associated risks.

[There are suggestions throughout this guide on next steps and how to address issues.](#)

The University aligns with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Management Standards approach for preventing stress at work.

The approach helps identify and manage the six areas identified by the HSE as the main causes of stress at work. It provides advice on how to build a case for taking action, and how to involve all relevant colleagues across the University to work together to tackle challenges.

The approach also provides guidance on how to involve relevant university parties (Departments, Committees, Networks) that may be useful when gathering information on key issues raised.

Importantly, if it becomes apparent that someone is experiencing stress or a mental health condition, they should be encouraged to seek support by speaking with an appropriate person, such as their manager, University Occupational Health, Human Resources, a trade union representative, or their GP.

Although the University has a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work, diagnosing and treating stress symptoms isn't the responsibility of managers.

[The 'Additional Resources' section \(pages 18 and 19\) of this guide provides other useful advice, tools and resources for preventing and managing work-related stress.](#)

Conversation One: Demands

How *should* colleagues feel?

- Able to cope with the demands of their job.
- They have achievable demands in relation to the hours they work.
- Their skills and abilities are matched to the demands of their job.
- Concerns about their work environment are addressed.

Go through the following questions with your staff member and/or team

Does your workload feel achievable? Think about which tasks take up the most time and how your area/department or team adapts at busy times.

Do you feel the deadlines you are given are realistic? Do you ever have conflicting deadlines? If so, how often?

Have you had the right training to carry out the core functions of your role?

What improvements or support could be considered to help with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about you, your manager, your team, or wider University processes and arrangements.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation One: Demands

Working patterns

Allow regular breaks, especially when the work is complex or demanding.

Consider flexible working options, with changes to start and end times to help people cope with pressures outside work, like childcare or commuting.

Ensure holidays are taken, and not accumulated.

Useful University websites:

[Human Resources A-Z of HR Policies](#)

[Family Leave Policies](#)

[Family Friendly and Carer Hub](#)

University Conditions of Service and Codes of Practice can be found on the HR webpages: [Human Resources - Conditions of Services and Policies](#)

Workload

Hold regular meetings, both with individuals and as a team, to discuss anticipated workloads (and to deal with any predicted busy times). Encourage team collaboration and commitment. Assist and support staff with the prioritisation of work and establish realistic deadlines. Where appropriate provide training to help people prioritise tasks.

Develop a system to notify staff of unplanned tight deadlines and any exceptional need to work long hours.

Identify blocks of time to allow for genuine collaborative planning.

Encourage staff to raise concerns early.

The University Fair Work Statement and information can be found on the Human Resources website: [Fair Work Statement](#)

If you're the manager of a team understand how to negotiate, and discuss priorities and openly discuss conflicting workloads. Develop the skills to discuss with your manager if your team is already at full capacity.

Where applicable, consider introducing academic workload model practices.

Environment

Assess the risk and impact of other potential hazards, and take steps to deal with them by consulting with staff and other teams you rely on and collaborate with. For example, you could seek advice from; [The Health, Safety and Wellbeing Department](#) [Occupational Health](#) [Human Resources](#)

If there are concerns around safeguarding or personal safety, it might even be appropriate to link in with the police or a specialist charity.

Provide training to help staff deal with and defuse potentially difficult situations.

Take steps to reduce unwanted distraction, disturbance and noise levels.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Two: Control

How *should* colleagues feel?

- Encouraged to use their skills and initiative to carry out their work.
- Consulted over the way their work is organised and undertaken, e.g. through regular meetings, one-to-ones, and Annual Reviews.
- They should have regular opportunities for discussion and input at the start of projects or new pieces of work.
- Consulted with other issues affecting their work.
- Encouraged to develop new skills and undertake new and challenging pieces of work.

Go through the following questions with your staff member and/or team.

Do you feel involved in how decisions about your job are made? Think about whether you feel listened to and whether you have opportunities to input.

Do you feel your skills are used to good effect?

How could your existing skills be used more effectively?

Do you feel you have a say in how your work is organised and undertaken?

What improvements or support could be put in place to help with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about you, your manager, your team, or the wider University.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Two: Control

Learning and Development Conversation Skills

A range of toolkits and resources are available through the: [HR Conversations Hub](#)

You can access information about Coaching and Mentoring at the University on the HR webpages: [Coaching and Mentoring Opportunities](#)

Courses and Resources

are available on the Talent and Development (HR) website: [Learning and Development Courses](#)

Communication

Help staff have a say over the way their work is organised and undertaken through team planning meetings, one-to-ones and Annual Reviews. It's good practice to revisit these periodically throughout the year.

Hold regular discussions during the planning stages of new work to talk about the anticipated methods of working.

Allocate responsibility to teams rather than individuals where possible, to take projects forward.

Allow staff some control over the pace of their work.

Information and Conversation guides for **Annual Reviews** can be found on the HR webpages: [Preparing for Annual Review Conversations](#)

Decisions

Talk about the way decisions are made.

Allow and encourage people to participate in decision making, especially where it affects them.

Skills and training

Discuss the skills individuals possess and explore whether they feel able to apply them effectively in their work.

Talk about how people would like to use their skills.

Consider personal development or training plans, where you can ask staff to think about skills they would like to develop.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Three: **Support**

How *should* colleagues feel?

- They receive information and support from other employees and their managers.
- Managers support their staff and encourage people to support one another.
- Staff know what support is available and how to access it.
- Staff know how to access the resources they need.
- Staff receive regular and constructive feedback from their manager.

Go through the following questions with your staff member and/or team.

Do you feel the University is a positive place to work and that you are valued? Think about your working environment, the support available and the opportunities to talk about support you may need.

Do you know who to talk to and where to go when you need support? Think about where you would go for help if you were experiencing an issue and whether you would feel comfortable doing so.

Do you feel there are enough opportunities to discuss any emerging issues or pressures?

What improvements or support could be put in place to help with any of the issues you have talked about? Consider HR Policies, University Networks and other communities of practice.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Three: Support

University Wellness Action Plan

(UWAP) reminds us of what we need to do to stay well at work and details what we can do to look after our mental health and wellbeing.

It helps develop an awareness of our preferred working style, stress triggers and responses, and enables us to communicate these.

By encouraging conversations and building trust, people will feel more confident to talk about concerns – helping to reduce stigma that might be a barrier to accessing the appropriate support.

Mental Health Awareness Training is available for all staff. Use this link to self-enrol:

[University Training: Mental Health Awareness Training](#)

Support and Guidance for staff returning to work after a period of absence can be found in the Absence Policy.

The Reasonable Adjustments Policy and guidance can be accessed on the HR website.

Support

It's important to hold regular one-to-one and team meetings to talk about any emerging issues or pressures.

Include work-related stress or pressures as a standing item for meetings with staff and/or Annual Reviews.

Consider “buddying” or work shadowing opportunities to improve understanding of roles across teams.

Find examples of how people would like, or have received, good support from managers or employees.

Environment

Assess the risk of physical violence and verbal abuse by consulting with staff and relevant external agencies, such as the police and appropriate charities. Provide training to equip staff with the skills needed to manage and de-escalate difficult situations safely.

Training

Regularly discuss professional development opportunities with people and ensure training is up to date.

Offer appropriate training and learning options through the University learning platform and Talent and Development (HR) webpages.

Resources

Support available within the University:
[Counselling and Wellbeing services](#) through the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

[Occupational Health Service](#)
[Staff Disability Service](#),
[Edinburgh Sport Active Lives](#)
[The Chaplaincy](#) (open to all faiths and none)

You can talk to staff about the ways the EAP service can provide support if they, or a family member (aged 18 or over), is experiencing issues outside of work too.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit actions:

Conversation Four: Relationships

How *should* colleagues feel?

- They are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours such as bullying or harrassment at work.
- They are aware that the University:
- promotes positive behaviours at work
 - has policies and procedures to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour
 - has systems in place to enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour
 - has systems in place to enable and encourage staff to report unacceptable behaviour

Go through the following questions with your staff member and/ or team.

Have you experienced or witnessed unacceptable behaviour at work? If so, do you feel satisfied with how was this dealt with? What could have been improved?

Do you feel that honest, open communication is encouraged within the University?

Do you know where to go and what to do if you experience or witness unacceptable behaviour? Do you feel confident that steps will be taken to stop this behaviour?

What improvements or support could be put in place to help with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about you, your manager, your department/team/area, or the wider University.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Four: Relationships

The **'Additional Resources'** section of this guide (pages 18 and 19) include links to the following University resources:

- University stress risk assessment templates
- Wellness Action Plan (WAP)
- A-Z of HR Policies
- University Behaviours Charter
- Staff Networks
- Talent and Development (HR - Training and Courses)
- The [Compassionate Communication Charter](#)

Report and Support can be accessed via the University webpages [Report and Support](#)

The University has a Dignity and Respect Policy and a Behaviours Charter outlining acceptable behaviours.

The Dignity and Respect policy also outlines procedures for reporting incidents.

As a manager, consider regularly communicating these policies and procedures to staff to raise awareness.

The University has a system for people to report unacceptable behaviour, it's called Report and Support.

As a manager, encourage good communication and provide training to help with listening skills, confidence building and assertiveness.

Encourage employees to meet regularly by creating consistent opportunities for collaboration, communication, and shared discussion.

Incorporating team-building activities can help strengthen working relationships, improve morale, and facilitate a more supportive and connected team environment.

Make sure that you are providing the same level of support and communication for staff who work remotely or to those in more isolated roles, like lone workers or those in separate locations.

Create opportunities to celebrate achievements and recognise successes in order to strengthen team cohesion, boost morale, and reinforce a sense of value and appreciation among staff.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these actions

Conversation Five: Role

How *should* colleagues feel?

- They should understand their role and responsibilities, and be aware that the University can provide information to enable greater clarity, if needed..
- The requirements the University places on them are clear.
- They are able to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities through the systems that the University has in place.

Go through the following questions with your staff member and/ or team.

Do you feel clear on what your responsibilities are?

Are you clear on what your annual objectives are and what success looks like for you, your area/department and the university? Do you feel that they are achievable?

Do you feel you understand how work is structured in your department ? Do you know who is doing what and why and how your role fits in?

What improvements or support could be put in place to help with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about you, your manager, your area/department, the University.

Set a date to revisit the actions discussed

Conversation Five: Role

On-Boarding and Induction information and training resources can be found via the HR Learning and Development webpages: [On-boarding and Induction Guidance](#)

Stress information for managers can be found on the University Staff Health, Safety and Wellbeing webpages: [Work-related stress information](#)

New starters

Provide all new staff with a thorough induction into the University and its policies and procedures.

Include details of where to get support or who to speak to about health and wellbeing, including stress.

Consider completing a University Wellness Action Plan as part of the induction process, to share understanding about what keeps you well at work.

Communication

Provide clear work objectives.

Define work structures clearly so that all team members know who is doing what and why.

Hold regular one-to-one meetings to ensure people are clear about what is planned for the coming months.

Agree specific standards of performance for individual tasks and review them regularly.

Hold regular team meetings to enable staff to discuss any issues.

Display School/College or departmental objectives and the University long term strategy.

Role

Review, discuss, and update job descriptions regularly with staff to ensure core functions and priorities remain clear, and particularly following any change processes

Introduce personal work plans which are aligned to the objectives of the team and/or department.

Discuss training and retraining options regularly too.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Six: Change

How *should* colleagues feel?

- That the University engages with staff frequently when undergoing change.
- Staff are provided with timely information, enabling them to understand the reasons for proposed changes.
- Staff are consulted on changes and provided with opportunities to influence proposals.
- Staff are aware of the probable impact of any changes to their role and if necessary, they are given training to support any changes to their role.

Go through the following questions with your staff member and/or team.

Do you feel that the University manages change (small or large) well?

Do you feel you are properly consulted when changes are made which affect you and your role? Do you feel the reasons for the change are explained well?

Do you feel that you are involved in the planning process when changes are made?

What improvements or support could be put in place to help with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about you, your line manager, your department/area or the University more widely.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Six: Change

Try not to underestimate the effects of what you might view as a 'small' change. Small changes can have a big impact on people's ways of working, their moral and levels of work-related stress.

Useful University Links:

- [Trade Union information](#)
- [Human Resources](#)
- [Strategic Change](#)
- [Support for Staff at risk of Redundancy](#)

Consultation

Define and explain key steps of any changes being made (small or large).

Consult with staff early and regularly throughout a change process.

Build in consultation and support as key elements of any change process.

Involve staff in the planning process.

Provide a system for staff to comment and ask questions before, during and after the change.

Review how the change will impact on departmental and individual objectives and workloads.

Include training needs as part of the change process.

Communication

Start communication early and, as far as possible, make it a two-way conversation.

Explain what the University or the department area wants to achieve and explain why it is essential that the change takes place.

Explain timescales and how changes will impact directly on staff.

Have an agreed system for communicating to staff why a change is happening.

Have agreed methods of communication (such as meetings, notice boards, email and feedback forms) and their frequency.

Try not to rely on a single communication route – most people may have access to a PC in work but consider those who don't, or those who work off-campus.

Make sure that staff are aware of the impact of the change being made on their job.

Talk openly about the potential need for (re)training if that's appropriate.

Agreed action

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

University Resources

Guidance and Training

This Conversation Guide forms part of the University's arrangements for preventing and managing work-related stress.

If you notice a colleague experiencing stress, encourage them to talk to someone, whether it's a manager, HR, a trade union representative, their GP or Occupational Health.

Counselling and Wellbeing Services are available through the University Employee Assistance Programme webpages: [Employee Assistance Programme \(EAP\) - Counselling and Wellbeing Services for Staff](#)

Mental Health Awareness Training is available through the University learning platform - People and Money. It can help improve awareness about mental health and develop key skills to support others: [Mental Health Awareness training for all staff](#)

Explore additional learning and development resources on the HR Talent and Development Learning webpages: [Courses and Resources](#)

Policies and Resources

[The University Health, Safety and Wellbeing Policy](#).

A-Z HR Policies and Guidance web pages: [A-Z of HR Policies](#)

[HR Talent and Development - Conversations Hub](#)

If you or someone you know has faced or witnessed bullying, harassment, discrimination, or gender-based violence, you can report it anonymously or seek support from the staff service: [Report and Support](#)

[University Behaviours Charter](#)

[Compassionate Communication Charter](#)

[Community - Equality, Diversity and Inclusion](#)

Health and Wellbeing

[The University Framework to Support Wellbeing Activity](#).

[The Staff Health and Wellbeing Hub](#) includes;

- Wellness Action Plan Guidance and Template
- Stress risk assessment template and guidance

[The Employee Assistance Programme](#)

[University Occupational Health Service](#)

[The Staff Disability Advice Service](#)

[The Chaplaincy Listening Service](#)

[Edinburgh Sport - Active Lives](#)

External Resources

External Resources

In 2017 the UK government reviewed the role of employers supporting individuals with mental health conditions.

The 'Thriving at Work' report sets out 'Core Standards' that the reviewers recommend employers of all sizes can put in place. You can access the full report here: [Mental Health at Work Report](#)

The Department for Education and Universities UK commissioned a report first published in 2020 offering a refreshed strategic framework for a whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing at universities. It calls on universities to see mental health as foundational to all aspects of university life, for all students and all staff. Read the report here: [Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities Report](#)

The HSE has published guidance on the prevention and management of work-related stress. Access the guidance here: [Health and Safety Executive \(HSE\). Work Related Stress and How to Manage it](#)

The charity group **Mind** has guidance on stress and how to manage it. This can be accessed here: [Work and Stress - How to be mentally healthy at work](#)

Healthy Working Lives (Scotland) provide information and guidance on tackling stress in the workplace. The information can be accessed here: [Healthy Working Lives - Supporting a mentally healthy workplace](#)

NHS Scotland offers support for stress resources including self-care and help in a crisis. Information can be accessed here: [Stress - Right Decision](#)

NHS24 Mental Health Hub Telephone advice and support on healthcare can be obtained from NHS24 by phoning 111 [The Mental Health Hub is open 24/7](#)

Bullying, harassment and discrimination

The **HSE** has guidance on ways to prevent, manage and respond to complaints of inappropriate behaviour. Guidance can be accessed via this link: [Preventing Violence and Aggression at Work](#)

Acas advice on bullying and harassment at work: a guide for managers and employers: [Handling a complaint](#)

CIPD advice on harassment and bullying at work: [CIPD Fact Sheet](#)

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has advice on tackling discrimination and harassment, the report can be accessed here: [Report on UK compliance with human rights recommendations](#)

See Me in Work (Scotland) [Understanding stigma and discrimination](#)

Helplines and 24/7 support

Samaritans provide confidential emotional support 24 hours a day.

Telephone free on: **116 123** or find a local branch: www.samaritans.org



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