

Recovery from Stress: A school manager's guide to helping colleagues

Contents

1. What is stress	1
2. Stress in schools: the risk assessment programme	5
3. What the low stress school looks like	26
4. What school managers should know about stress and anxiety	39
5. Anxiety management	46
6. Methods of overcoming stress	61
7. Recognising patterns of not coping	69
Appendix 1: The Role of the GP, the NHS and private medicine	79
Appendix 2: School policy template: staff stress policy	81
Appendix 3: It's the classroom the counts	86
Appendix 4: Policy template on the physical environment	87
Appendix 5: Policy template on behaviour	89
Appendix 6: Policy template on methods of teaching	93
Appendix 7: Policy template on self-esteem	94
Bibliography	95

1. What is stress?

1.1 Why stress is suddenly an issue for schools

In 1999 a teacher was awarded £300,000 in settlement of a stress case. The award was considered by many at the time to have been fairly modest compared with some awards being made in other sectors, and would certainly have been higher had the teacher in question been younger. Indeed if a young teacher recently out of training suffered such stress that he or she could not continue in what would otherwise have been a 40 year career, the award could be massive.

In this case the employer was shown to have been negligent because the employer could have “reasonably foreseen” the psychological damage being done to the teacher as a result of workplace stress.

Thus both legal precedent and general current thinking in the area of health and safety at work makes it clear that the local education authority, managers and governors of schools have a duty to set up systems that do not cause unacceptable stress to staff. In this regard schools are no different to other locations in which people are employed. The responsibilities to staff of those running a school are similar to those running businesses large and small.

Current practice and the law which backs it up is not however utterly unreasonable. It is not suggested that no one must ever suffer stress. Rather steps must be taken to minimise the chances of someone suffering undue stress as a result of the job. Then if these steps do not prove adequate in a particular case the school and the authority has a twofold job:

1. To take action in the immediate case.
2. To review the situation so that the issues that arise in this particular case do not arise again.

Thus within the law and within current practice, employers have a duty to set up working environments that do not cause their employees to suffer undue stress. Where an employee feels that he or she is suffering undue stress as a result of work then he or she has a duty to:

1. Inform the appropriate person in the school that there is a problem.
2. Give all relevant information about the nature and causes of the problem.
3. Give medical evidence (normally from a GP) which clearly shows that
 - The individual is suffering from stress to such a degree that it is interfering with the individual’s well-being and normal health
 - The stress has arisen as a result of work.

Point 3.2 is important here since if a male teacher suffers stress because his wife decides to leave him for another man, he may then find his job extremely stressful – but the prime cause of the stress is not the job but aspects of his personal life. Such a teacher might well be told by his GP to take time off work because of stress but this does not imply in any way that the school or authority is liable.

Likewise it is extremely unlikely that a claim could be made because the teacher has money worries, even if he or she claims that the stress is caused because the school does not pay enough!

A school that is therefore carrying out its duty in terms of stress correctly would have mechanisms in which:

- a) Teachers receive some in-service training about stress, so that they know how to recognise stress overloads in the early stages, and they know how they can take action themselves to stop stress getting worse.
- b) Teachers know to whom they should go in the event of suffering increasing stress levels as a result of work.
- c) Any report of unacceptable levels of stress from a member of staff is thoroughly and sympathetically examined, with full written reports being given to the teacher, governors and local authority.
- d) Action which is deemed to be necessary is then taken in each case of a teacher reporting increased stress. Where the school or authority decides to take no action this should be backed up with detailed notes as to why, and if at all possible expert evidence concurring with this judgement.
- e) Where reports of stress arise and are accepted by the school or authority, situations within the school are changed to avoid other teachers suffering stress from the same causes.
- f) Teachers who have time off for any sickness have return to work interviews with a senior manager which allows the member of staff to express concerns and worries about the job.
- g) Stress counselling for staff is readily available.
- h) Staff who take time off for stress related problems are allowed to come back to work slowly.

We feel that particular attention should be given to point a) for two reasons. Firstly, it is obviously helpful to teachers for them to receive education on stress. They are in particularly stressful jobs, and it is not unreasonable that the employer should give this guidance as part of its health and safety work. Secondly, and at the risk of being particularly cynical at this point, if the health and safety documentation given to staff along with this in-service meeting on stress tells staff how to proceed during the early stages of coping with excessive stress, and a member of staff does not follow this guidance, then the school and authority has a very good defence to any claim that it did not take the issue seriously.

1.2 Definitions: What is stress? What is anxiety?

Stress is a physical reaction to everyday events. It is a part of the natural human condition. Without some stress we do not live full and meaningful lives; the person without stress is probably asleep and not dreaming.

However a surfeit of stress is an illness. Like many illnesses it is relatively common, and can be cured. Apart from in extreme cases in which action is not taken in the early stages of excess stress, there is normally no reason why a teacher suffering from an overload of stress cannot make a full recovery and continue in full time work.

Anxiety is also a natural human condition which becomes an illness when suffered to a large degree. Anxiety is primarily caused by an apprehension of the future as opposed to stress which is caused by a build up of events in the past. Thus stress and anxiety are closely related illnesses – anxiety can build up as a result of stress – and it is very common for a person suffering from stress also to suffer from anxiety.

1.3 The 7 stages of stress

Stage 1: You know there is stress in your life but you quite enjoy the buzz that the adrenaline gives you in coping with it. After the stress peaks you recover and relax.

Stage 2: The relaxation doesn't happen, and the feeling of stress stays with you longer than it should. Your behaviour starts to change little by little. At first you hardly notice the changes.

Stage 3: You recognise that you are feeling stressed, but just cannot see a way out of the problem. You would like to cut out certain stressful activities but simply cannot – others rely on you, they are part of your life, you have to work to earn money... If questioned you start to blame others.

Stage 4: In order to cope with the pressures of life you start cutting out other activities that used to be fun. You justify this by saying that you are too tired, or blame your lack of involvement on other changes in circumstances.

Stage 5: You become more and more exhausted at the end of each day. Nuisances become irritants. The instability of your reactions grows so that others comment on them. The stress level so dominates your life that you cannot see the forest for the trees.

Stage 6: You keep on working and working on all sorts of things, but actually avoid dealing with the real you and the real problems you face. Slowly you lose all contact with the real you.

Stage 7: You lose contact with your own identity and suffer a complete breakdown.

Teachers can keep teaching all the way through the seven stages of stress but their effectiveness as teachers starts to decline once they reach stage 3. By stage 5 the teacher's ability to teach must be in serious doubt and the stress is such that the teacher may be fully entitled to make a claim against the school, the LEA and/or the governors.

1.4 How harmful is an overload of stress?

On 26 May 2000, the Times carried an article about a study from the Harvard Centre for Society and Health which showed that "A stressful job is just as unhealthy as smoking." According to the report,

"The research... is the first to put a measure on the degree to which stress can damage health, finding that women in stressful jobs are about a fifth more likely to suffer from bad health than those in an undemanding job.

"Previous studies have shown that stress increases the chances of a heart attack, but the new research found that women with stressful jobs were as likely to suffer illnesses as those who smoked or did no exercise.

"The two biggest risk factors for stress were being busy but unable to plan one's working day. Ichiro Kawachi, director of the centre, said that it showed how important it was to change the way people work, giving them more tasks only if they can cope."

1.5 Is there more stress than in the past?

When faced with research such as that by Kawachi it is commonplace for journalists to suggest that we live in particularly stressful times. By extension this means that the level of stress is increasing year by year and that soon we will all be suffering from unbearably high levels of stress.

In fact this is almost certainly a false argument. There has probably always been stress in people's lives – one would imagine that being chased by a sabre-toothed tiger was probably

quite a stressful experience. Plague, war, poor medicine, an invasion of your village by men on their way to the Crusades, starvation as a result of the failure of the crop in your village, working 16 hours a day 6 days a week in a mine, arrest by the Inquisition – all these events were also highly stressful and, at different times and in different places, part of everyday life.

What has changed therefore is not that we now have more stress, or even that we necessarily suffer more stressful experiences, but that we now suffer stress from different sources from those experienced even just 10 years ago. But it is the generally accepted medical view that the balance of pressure is always the same. Most of us have opportunities for good and bad experiences, and the opportunity to have good and bad responses to these experiences.

The fact is that most of us are able to cope with modern stress most of the time – although we may not always be able to cope with stress as well as we might like. Driving to work, trying to get Windows 98 to behave with some semblance of stability on a PC, dealing with 30 children in a classroom who would prefer not to be there, returning faulty goods to a shop – these can all be stressful experiences. The fact that we can cope with most of them most of the time means that we are able to learn about stress and how to live with it.

Stress therefore is not a condition that is out of our control – it is something that is perfectly manageable, and we use experience and learning to manage it.

If there is a problem in today's world which was not there in the past it is that our world is changing so fast that we often do not have enough time to learn appropriate techniques for coping with each new type of stress with which we are presented. If we try to keep our lives the same then we rapidly find ourselves in conflict with the environment in which we live. If we accept the changes that affect our lives in every way then we can suffer the stress that comes from “running just to stay in the same place”.

2. Stress in Schools: The Risk Assessment Programme

The above discussion is intended to enable you to prepare a risk assessment for your school in relation to work in the school which might cause teachers undue stress. As a background you might like to refer to *Physical and Mental Fitness to Teach of Teachers and of Entrants to Initial Teacher Training*, published by the DfEE on 12 May 1999. This document states that,

“teachers and those training to become teachers need a high standard of physical and mental health to enter or remain in the teaching profession, as teaching is a demanding career and teachers have to act in loco parentis for the pupils in their charge. The health, education, safety and welfare of pupils are important in deciding on an individual’s fitness to teach.... Employers will need to assess medical fitness of those seeking work... Employers are concerned with the continuing fitness of those in such employment and the suspension or termination of employment on medical grounds.

“A local education authority or governing body must not appoint anyone to, or continue to employ them in, relevant employment unless he or she has the health and physical capacity for such employment (Regulations 8 and 9 of the Teachers Regulations).”

In order to make the risk assessment and to co-ordinate it with the requirements of *Physical and Mental Fitness to Teach*, we suggest there should be a review of the following elements that make up the total stress risk situation in your school.

Risk Assessment A: Risk of undue stress which might relate to the individual teacher’s background

Information of a personal nature concerning a teacher’s susceptibility to stress will be revealed by the medical review that is required as part of “Physical and Mental Fitness to Teach”. The fact that a teacher has had stress related problems in the past should not in our opinion be a barrier to further teaching work. Rather the issue that is raised should be “what has the individual done about stress reduction?” There is no doubt that a person who has suffered undue levels of stress, and then been on a good stress counselling course, can be far better equipped to cope with stress than someone who has never had any experience of high levels of stress.

The regulations state that “employers are concerned with the continuing fitness of those in [teaching] employment...” This might have no implication for the managers of a school if the local arrangements are such that all matters of this nature are the province of trained medical staff. But even if this is the case, it may still come to the attention of managers in a school that a member of staff seems to have difficulties which enhance the risk of this teacher suffering undue stress as a result of work. Where this is the case it may be enough to report the issue back to the appropriate medical authority, but where this is not possible the manager should undertake a discussion of the problem with the member of staff along the lines indicated by the following record card:

**Record of meeting relating to the possibility of a teacher
suffering from a stress overload**

1. Teacher's name _____
2. Date of meeting _____
3. Location of meeting _____
4. Present at the meeting _____
5. Reason for suspecting the teacher might be suffering from undue stress which might relate to the teacher's background

6. Details of any past stress suffered by the teacher _____

7. Details of any past help or support that the teacher has had in relation to stress or anxiety

8. The teacher's assessment of the situation _____

9. Is any further treatment proposed? _____
