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CONTROLLING RISK TOGETHER

Talking Toolkit

Preventing work-related stress

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION
FOR EMPLOYERS

The earlier a problem is tackled the less impact it will have.

PREVENTING WORK-RELATED STRESS

Stress affects us all at different times and in different ways. It can cause you to feel physically unwell, cause mental health problems and make existing problems worse.

Figures for 2018-19 taken from the Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey estimate approximately 16,000 persons suffered from stress, anxiety or depression caused or made worse by work. It is recognised that work-related stress contributes significantly to staff absences.

It's important to remember that it's not an employer's or a line manager's job to diagnose or treat stress, whatever its cause. If an employee is having problems, it's important that they get help as soon as possible.

Whether an employer is a small business or a large corporation, the law requires all employers to assess the risk of work-related stress and to put steps in place to tackle those risks.

Line managers can play an important role in helping to implement these measures and there are many tools, resources and guides available to help employers in deciding what these measures should be (see pages 21 and 22).

This toolkit is designed to help line managers hold initial conversations with employees as one part of an employer's journey towards preventing work-related stress.

By taking action employers can help create a more engaged, healthy workforce, boost productivity and save money.

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

If you think that an employee is having problems, encourage them to talk to someone, whether it's their line manager, trade union representative, GP or their occupational health team.

USING YOUR
TALKING TOOLKIT

Starting the conversation is an important first step towards preventing work-related stress and developing the actions and stress risk assessment employers need to comply with the law.

The Talking Toolkit should not be used in isolation as an employer's only response if there is an existing problem with work-related stress in the organisation. It can be provided to line managers to help them start to have simple, practical conversations with employees.

The toolkit has six templates for six different conversations. Each of these has a different theme designed to get line managers and employees talking about issues which may be causing work-related stress or issues which could have the potential to become future causes if not managed properly.

For each conversation, the first sheet gives the line manager a series of questions to start discussions with an employee about the causes of work-related stress. The second sheet helps the line manager to develop ideas for how to begin tackling causes.

There is no strict format for these conversations, or how line managers should conduct them, and the layout of the toolkit is not prescriptive. An employer could ask a line manager to hold one a week or one a month. The conversations could focus on just one topic or cover all six.

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

Importantly, employers should make sure that there is time available for line managers and employees to have these conversations. The toolkit also relies on both managers and employees having an open and honest conversation.

Line managers should listen to what is being said rather than trying to offer excuses or explanations. Action points and solutions should be 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.

The Talking Toolkit can form part of an organisation's response but should not be used in isolation as the employer's only measure to prevent work-related stress.

6 CAUSES OF WORK-RELATED STRESS - CONVERSATIONS

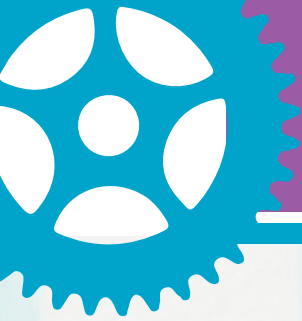| 1	2	3	4	5	6
Demands	Control	Support	Relationships	Role	Change

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The Talking Toolkit is just one step on the journey towards managing work-related stress and bringing in measures needed to address the risks and help your organisation comply with the law.

After you complete the six conversations, you should have built up a picture of the potential causes of work-related stress in your organisation.

There are some suggestions throughout this toolkit on how you can tackle the issues. You may decide to implement the HSE Management Standards, which is an established and recognised approach for preventing stress at work.

The approach helps identify and manage the six causes of stress at work, providing advice on how to build the business case for taking action, and how to involve the management team and all employees across your organisation to work together to tackle the problems.

The approach also advises on how and when to involve your employees in gathering information on problems by organising focus groups, surveys and working groups to identify solutions which are relevant to where you work.

Importantly, if you discover that someone is experiencing stress or a mental health problem, they should be encouraged to talk to someone, whether it's a manager, their trade union representative, GP or occupational health team.

Remember, although employers have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work, diagnosing and treating stress isn't their responsibility.

The 'Sources of further advice' section (page 21) points you in the direction of other useful guides, workbooks and tools for both managing and preventing work-related stress.
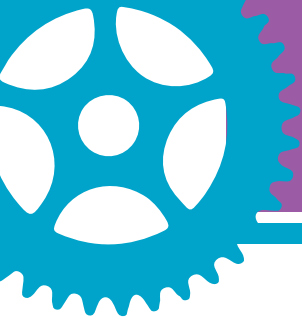
85%

of people in Northern Ireland admit to feeling stress at work

Investors in People (IIP) Report 2018

CONVERSATION 1
DEMANDS

How your employee should feel

• They are able to cope with the demands of their job.

• They are provided with 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 employee or team.

Does your workload feel achievable? Think about which tasks take up the most time and how your organisation copes at busy times.

Do you feel the deadlines you are given are realistic? Do you often have conflicting deadlines?

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

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 organisation.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

CONVERSATION ①
DEMANDS

LINE MANAGER'S SUGGESTIONS TO PREVENT STRESS AT WORK

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Did you know that in 2018 the Duke of Cambridge launched **www.mentalhealthatwork. org.uk** from Heads Together and Mind? It brings together resources, training and information – providing the tools needed to make workplace wellbeing a priority.

Find out more at: **www. mentalhealthatwork.org.uk**

The Chartered Accountants Benevolent Association have produced a toolkit for how people can reduce their workload to reduce work-related stress. The tips are relevant to most workplaces and can be found by searching for 'workload' on **www. mentalhealthatwork.org.uk**

WORKING PATTERNS

- Allow regular breaks, especially when the work is complex or emotionally demanding.
- Consider changes to start and end times to help employees cope with pressures outside work, like childcare or commuting.

WORKLOAD

- Hold regular meetings, both with individuals and as a team, to discuss anticipated workloads (and to deal with any predicted busy times).
- Provide training to help employees prioritise.
- Develop a system to notify employees of unplanned tight deadlines and any exceptional need to work long hours.
- Identify blocks of time to allow for genuine collaborative planning.

- If you're a team leader or supervisor, learn to say no to work if your team is already at full capacity.
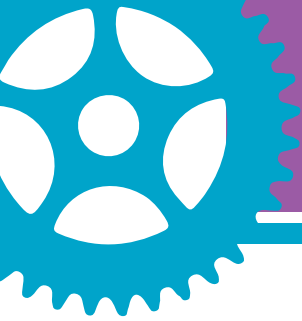- Consider the introduction of a work/life balance policy.

ENVIRONMENT

- Assess the risk and impact of other potential hazards and take steps to deal with them by consulting with employees and others. For example, to deal with the potential hazard of violence and aggression, you could seek advice from the police or a specialist charity.
- Provide training to help employees deal with and defuse difficult situations.
- Take steps to reduce unwanted distraction, disturbance and noise levels.

Manager's action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

CONVERSATION 2
CONTROL

How your employee should feel

- They are consulted over the way their work is organised and undertaken, e.g. through regular meetings, one-to-ones, performance reviews.
- They have regular opportunities for discussion and input at the start of projects or new pieces of work.
- They are encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work.
- They are consulted over things affecting their work.
- They are encouraged to develop new skills and undertake new and challenging pieces of work.

Go through the following questions with your employee or team.

Do you feel involved in how decisions about your job are made? Think about whether you feel listened to and trusted, how you are consulted and any opportunities for 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 line manager, your organisation.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

CONVERSATION 2
CONTROL

LINE MANAGER'S SUGGESTIONS TO PREVENT STRESS AT WORK

A 2018 report by Investors in People (IIP) found that **85%** of people in Northern Ireland admit to feeling stress at work, with a further **63%** agreeing that their mental health had been affected by their job at some point in their career.

COMMUNICATION

- Help employees to have a say over the way their work is organised and undertaken through project meetings, one-to-ones and performance reviews.
- Hold regular discussion forums during the planning stage of new work to talk about the anticipated methods of working.
- Allocate responsibility to teams rather than individuals to take projects forward.
- Allow employees some control over the pace of their work.
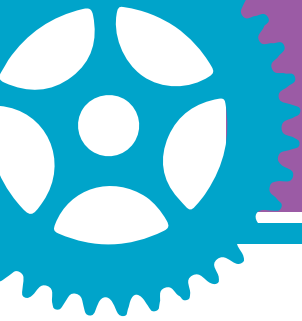
DECISIONS

- Talk about the way decisions are made.
- Allow and encourage people to participate in decision making, especially where it affects them.

SKILLS AND TRAINING

- Talk about the skills people have and if they believe they are able to use these to good effect.
- Talk about how people would like to use their skills.
- Consider personal development/ training plans, where you ask employees to think about the skills they would like to develop.

Manager's action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

CONVERSATION 3
SUPPORT

How your employee should feel

- They receive information and support from other employees and their managers.

- The organisation has systems in place to enable and encourage managers to support their employees and for employees to support one another.

- They know what support is available and how to access it.

- They know how to access the resources they need.

- They receive regular and constructive feedback.

Go through the following questions with your employee or team.

Do you feel that your organisation is a positive place to work and that you are valued? Think about the 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? Think about you, your line manager, your organisation.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

CONVERSATION 3
SUPPORT

LINE MANAGER'S SUGGESTIONS TO PREVENT STRESS AT WORK

Consider Wellness Actions Plans (WAPs) (see page 21) which can help you to put practical steps in place to ensure you are supported when you aren't feeling great.

The IIP 'Managing Mental Health' report 2018 shows that just **10%** of employees felt they could trust their line manager with a mental health concern, suggesting that office hierarchy is deterring many from discussing their issues with bosses.

SUPPORT

- 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 employees and/or performance reviews.

- Consider buddying systems or work shadowing to improve understanding of roles across the team.

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

RESOURCES

- Share information on areas of support available with your employees like assistance programmes, charities, occupational health and external organisations.

- Talk about the ways your organisation can provide support if someone is experiencing problems outside work.
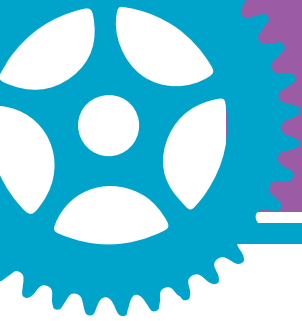
TRAINING

- Regularly consult with people to ensure training is up to date.

- Offer access to counsellors or training in basic counselling skills.

ENVIRONMENT

- Assess the risk of physical violence and verbal abuse by consulting with employees and others, such as the police and charities.

- Provide training to help employees deal with and defuse difficult situations.

Manager's action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

CONVERSATION 4
RELATIONSHIPS

How your employee should feel

- They are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours such as bullying or harassment at work.
- The organisation promotes positive behaviours at work.
- The organisation has agreed policies and procedures to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour.
- The organisation has systems in place to enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour.
- The organisation has systems in place to enable and encourage employees to report unacceptable behaviour.

Go through the following questions with your employee or team.

Have you experienced or witnessed unacceptable behaviour at work? Do you feel satisfied with how this was dealt with?

Do you feel that honest, open communication is encouraged in your organisation?

Do you feel that 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 line manager, your organisation.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

CONVERSATION 4
RELATIONSHIPS

LINE MANAGER'S SUGGESTIONS TO PREVENT STRESS AT WORK

HSENI provides a stress risk assessment template and example risk assessments for small businesses (page 22).
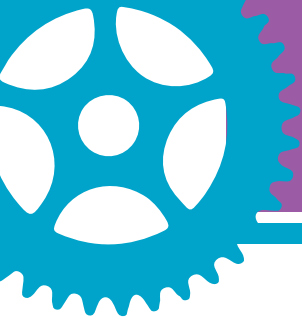
Labour Relations Agency (LRA) and Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) guidance on bullying and harassment is also available (page 22).

Studies have shown that stress, anxiety and depression caused or made worse by work accounts for a high proportion of staff absenteeism.

- Have an agreement with employees and senior leaders on which behaviours are unacceptable.

- Have a written policy for dealing with unacceptable behaviour and procedures for reporting incidents.

- Regularly communicate these policies and procedures to employees and make sure that they are understood.

- Have a confidential system for people to report unacceptable behaviour.

- Encourage good communication and provide training to help, such as listening skills, confidence building and assertiveness.

- Encourage and provide opportunities for employees to socialise together.

- Make sure that you are providing the same level of support and communications for employees who work in isolation like lone workers or those in separate locations.

- Find ways to celebrate success.

Manager's action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

CONVERSATION 5
ROLE

LINE MANAGER'S TEMPLATE
FOR CONVERSATION FIVE

How your employee should feel

- They understand their role and responsibilities.
- The organisation provides information to enable them to understand their role and all of their responsibilities.
- The requirements the organisation 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 organisation has in place.

Go through the following questions with your employee or team.

Do you feel clear on what your responsibilities are?

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

Do you feel you understand how work is structured in your department and in the wider organisation? 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 line manager, your organisation.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

CONVERSATION 5
ROLE

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Did you know that stress, anxiety and depression caused or made worse by work impacts around 16,000 employees every year in Northern Ireland?

Mind and Time to Change's toolkit, 'Tackling stress in the workplace: what you can do' brings together different organisations' resources on work-related stress. To find out more, select 'Toolkits' at **www.mentalhealthatwork. org.uk**

LINE MANAGER'S SUGGESTIONS TO PREVENT STRESS AT WORK

NEW STARTERS

• Give all new employees a thorough induction into your organisation and its policies and procedures. Include details of where to get support or who to speak to about stress.

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 regularly. Hold regular team meetings to enable employees to discuss any issues.
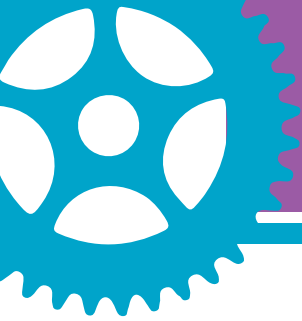
• Display departmental/ organisational targets and objectives.

• Introduce or revise job descriptions with the involvement of the employee to ensure the core functions and priorities are clear.

ROLE

• Introduce personal work plans which are aligned to the objectives of the team/ organisation.

• Introduce or revise job descriptions to ensure the core functions and priorities are clear.

• Review job descriptions regularly, especially following change, and discuss training/retraining regularly too.

Manager's action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

CONVERSATION 6
CHANGE

How your employee should feel

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

Go through the following questions with your employee or team.

Do you feel that your organisation handles change 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 organisation.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

CONVERSATION 6
CHANGE

LINE MANAGER'S SUGGESTIONS TO PREVENT STRESS AT WORK

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Never underestimate the effects of 'minor' changes. Seemingly small changes can have a big impact on people's ways of working, their morale and level of work-related stress.

CONSULTATION

- Define and explain key steps of changes being made.

- Consult employees early and throughout the change process.

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

- Involve employees in the planning process.

- Provide a system for employees 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/retraining needs as part of your change process.

COMMUNICATION

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

- Explain what the organisation wants to achieve and why it is essential that the change takes place.

- Explain the timescales of changes and how changes will impact directly on them.

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

- Have agreed methods of communication (such as routine meetings, notice boards, letters, email and feedback forms).

- Don't rely on a single communication route – most people may have access to a PC in work but what about those who don't, or those who work off-site?

- Make sure that employees are aware of the impact of the change being made on their jobs. Talk about the potential need for (re) training.

Manager's action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

SOURCES OF
FURTHER ADVICE

This Talking Toolkit can form part of your organisation's response to preventing work-related stress. If people you work with are experiencing stress, they should be encouraged to talk to someone, whether it's a manager, their trade union representative, GP or an occupational health team.

SAMARITANS

Samaritans provide confidential, non-judgemental emotional support for people experiencing feelings of distress.

Telephone: 116 123
(24 hours a day, free to call)

www.samaritans.org

Lifeline

No matter what your age or where you live in Northern Ireland, if you are or someone you know is in distress or despair, Lifeline is there to help.

Telephone: 0808 808 8000
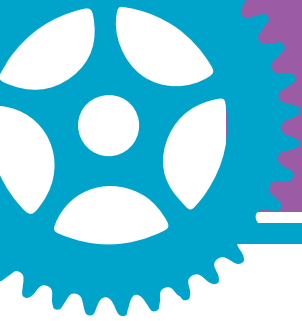(24 hours a day, free to call)

www.lifelinehelpline.info

STRESS

• What work-related stress is and how to tackle it:
www.hseni.gov.uk/stress

• HSE's Management Standards to prevent work-related stress: www.hseni.gov.uk/articles/what-are-management-standards-work-related-stress

• For further information please contact a member of HSENI's Mental Well-being at Work Advisory Service at stress@hseni.gov.uk or call 028 9024 3249

MENTAL HEALTH

• The government commissioned Lord Stevenson and Paul Farmer to review the role of employers supporting individuals with mental health conditions. Their 'Thriving at Work' report sets out 'Core Standards' that the reviewers recommend employers of all sizes can and should put in place. You can read the full report at:
https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/resource/thriving-at-work-the-stevenson-farmer-review-of-mental-health-and-employers

• Mind's free Wellness Action Plans are an easy, practical way of helping people to support their own mental health at work: https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-your-staff/employer-resources/wellness-action-plan-download

• Business in the Community is committed to supporting employers to tackle mental ill-health in the workplace and have produced a range of Toolkits for employers. This includes a free resource, developed in partnership with Action Mental Health and in consultation with a number of employers across public and private sector, which is designed to help managers support the mental health of their team members: www.bitcni.org.uk/programmes/mental-health

• Heads Together and Mind's website brings together resources, training, information and tools to make workplace wellbeing a priority: www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk

SOURCES OF
FURTHER ADVICE

The Public Health Agency provides five directories (one for each Trust area) that list the names, numbers and web addresses (where applicable) of organisations within each area that offer services to help improve mental health and emotional wellbeing.

www.publichealth.hscni. net/publications/directory-services-help-improve-mental-health-and-emotional-wellbeing

Minding your head is an online mental health resource run by the Public Health Agency

www.mindingyourhead.info

VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT

- HSENI advice and guidance on dealing with bullying and harassment: https://www.hseni. gov.uk/publications/bullying-and-harassment-advice-organisations-managers-and-individuals

- LRA advice – Bullying and harassment: www.lra.org. uk/resolving-problems/types-problems/bullying-and-harassment

- CIPD advice – Harassment and bullying at work: www.cipd. co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/emp-law/harassment/factsheet?IsSrchRes=1

- ECNI advice – Harassment and bullying at work: https://www. equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Employers%20 and%20Service%20Providers/Harassment-Bullying2006.pdf

TOOLS AND TEMPLATES FROM HSENI

- The HSE stress indicator questionnaire can be used to assess the level of work-related stress within your organisation: www.hseni.gov.uk/publications/hseni-indicator-tool-questionnaire

- HSENI's prompt cards may be of use when completing the HSE Management Standards: www.hseni.gov.uk/publications/management-standards-prompt-cards

- HSENI's range of other guidance on work-related stress (including sample organisational risk assessments): https://www.hseni. gov.uk/node/1074

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Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland
83 Ladas Drive
Belfast
BT6 9FR
Northern Ireland

Helpline: 0800 032 0121
Telephone: 028 9024 3249
Email: mail@hseni.gov.uk

www.hseni.gov.uk

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