

Five key actions to
**Tackle
Workplace Stress**

Mindful Work



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Introduction, causes and effects

Workplace stress – the worrying facts

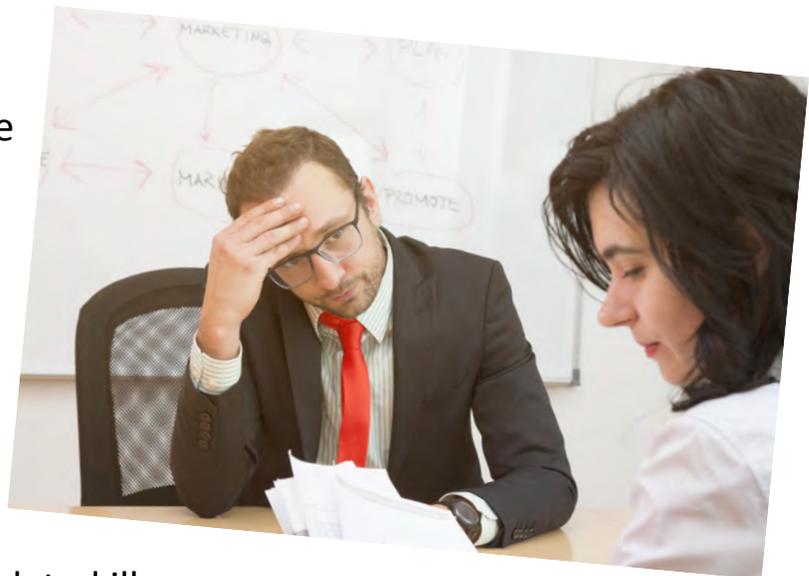
Stress is a huge problem in the workplace.

A survey by the Centre for Mental Health, showed that 55% of employees feel that working has an adverse effect on their mental well-being, and 34% feel an inability to cope with stress caused by work. The Office of National Statistics indicates that more than one third of us live with high levels of anxiety.

Unfortunately, workplace stress appears to be on the increase.

Research by The Priory in 2014 showed a 58% increase in stress in the last 10 years, and there is a 17% increase in the last 3 years in people being referred for stress-related illness.

The Mental Health Foundation suggests that 3 in every 10 employees will have a mental health problem in any year.



Introduction, causes and effects

What are the most common causes of workplace stress?

The **two top causes** of stress, that we hear again and again, are:

1. **Work overload and unreasonable deadlines** (which become more pronounced with cuts in service provision and tighter fiscal budgets)
2. **Difficulties with other people** especially line managers, colleagues, and clients

Closely followed by:

3. **Not being in control** of one's work environment
4. **Feeling under-valued** or misunderstood
5. **Poor pay, conditions** and physical environment

Work overload is a particular issue in the UK and USA, where working hours are increasing; in some workplaces working very long hours seems to be expected.

However, working more than 50 hours a week is both *counter-productive* (research by Stanford University) and can lead to health problems such as stroke (according to a 2015 NHS study of half a million people).

Introduction, causes and effects

What effect does workplace stress have?

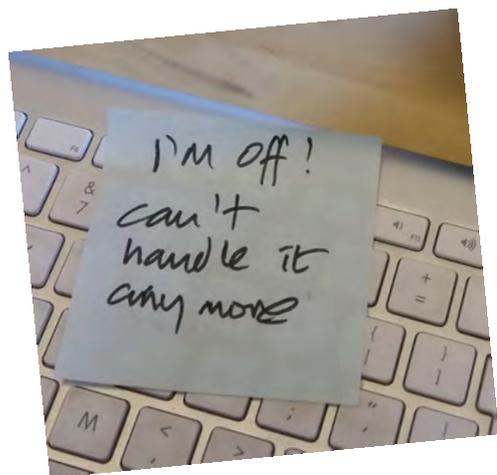
Stress is a killer factor in establishing effective organisations and viable businesses. Stressed staff display a lack of focus, creativity, and good decision-making.

Stressed individuals tend to communicate unskilfully, blame others, and behave without empathy, creating dysfunctional teams and conflict, and undermining external relationships with partners and clients.

Additionally, and on a more personal level, it leads to physical and mental health problems.

Taken together, these effects are likely to lead to:

- **Poor work quality**
- **Poor communication** with colleagues and clients
- **Reduced productivity**
- **Absenteeism** - or presenteeism (being there but doing very little)
- **Losing staff** altogether



Introduction, causes and effects

A Health and Safety Executive survey found that on average **27 days are lost each year per employee**, due to stress, anxiety or depression.

On average, **31 days are lost if an employee goes sick with anxiety**. If this figure seems significant, the fact is that most people suffering stress continue to work, so-called 'presenteesim', but are likely to struggle with concentration and effective decision-making. This costs employers dearly in lost productivity.

Secondary impacts of stress for staff include limiting social contacts with family and friends; not exercising; or eating unhealthily to soothe difficult feelings.



Action 1 - Know the signs

Know the signs of workplace stress

The first step is to know what's going on, both in yourself, and in your staff. Do you recognise the signs of stress?

To help with this, we have developed a **Stress Check - a free online tool** which you can fill in and save as a pdf file. Do it yourself and encourage colleagues and staff to do it too.



Workplace stress check

Name Date

This tool is designed to help you break stress down into manageable chunks. The tick boxes are there to help you identify what's a top priority to address (there's no magic score at the end). You don't have to answer everything, just fill in what's most relevant for you. Then figure out what you can do yourself, and what you need to discuss with others.

Workload	not a problem	problem	big problem
I have too much to do in the time allowed/available	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I find it difficult to prioritise and plan what to do, or when	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have too little work to do	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

When you've completed it, ask:

- What is it telling you?
- Who do you need to discuss it with?
- What's stopping you taking action about it – and how can you get past that?

Action 2 - Address work overload

Face up to work overload and unreasonable deadlines

There are many time management guides available online, but just getting organised may not be all that's needed. Somehow we need to approach the working day in an altogether more purposeful, creative and energetic way. This means clearing the obstacles first, that you may have identified in Action stage 1.

That said, here's our top action list:

- **Be clear what needs doing** - avoid surprises or burying your head in the sand
- **Make a table of tasks**, time required, what you need to do it (eg from others), deadline, & importance
- Figure out what's **realistic and achievable**
- **Share** this between staff and managers, agree a do-able list, and form a **strategy** for addressing the tasks which can't be done (eg inform those who need to know)
- **Stick** to the plan
- **Update** every week and if necessary go through this process again
- Make sure the plan is **reasonable and SMART**

Action 3 – Working relationships

Improve working relationships

When we ask people what they struggle with at work, 'other people' comes up in many forms. We're social animals, and we can't avoid playing out social games, fears and habits in the workplace, where we're surrounded by people we may not have chosen to be close to.



Action 3 – Working relationships

There are of course many approaches to improving team management. But from a mindfulness perspective, the following steps can be transformative:

- **Articulate the problems on paper** – who do you have a problem with, what are the triggers, how does that make you feel, what is your response?
- **Step back and breathe** – take time out to de-stress and learn to pause between action and response
- **Be clear what we really know to be true** – most of what we experience is in our own minds, and is our own story, yet may be inaccurate, and we can easily mis-read others or just have a difference in style
- **Recognise that we all have problems** – before reacting to what someone says or does, take a moment to step into their shoes and recognise the stress or difficulties they may be experiencing
- **Take appropriate action** – meet with the people concerned in an informal way, to explain on how their actions affect you – and be friendly!
- **Set an intention at the start of each day** to be friendly and compassionate, and smile more!

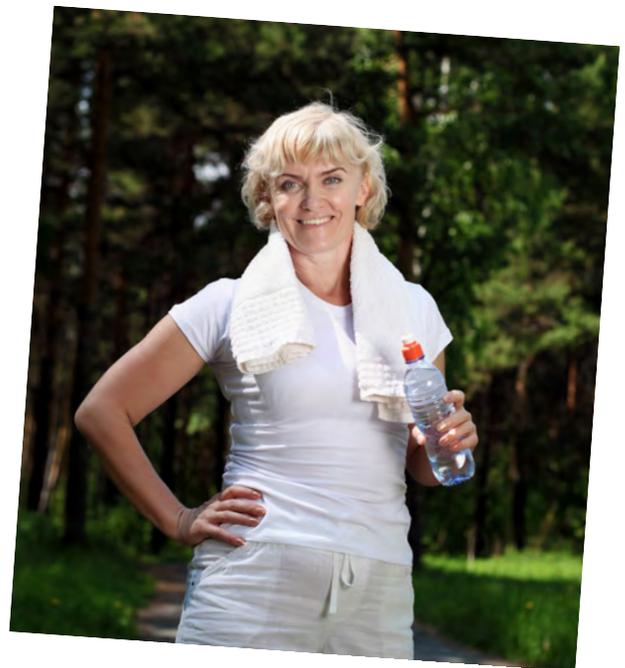


Action 4 – Taking care of yourself

Take care of yourself

The only person who can make things better is you – we all need to take responsibility for our own wellbeing (and encourage our staff and colleagues to do this too). So here are a few easy wins:

- **Create gaps** to pause, breathe and get perspective
- **Create a nurturing workspace** – tidy up and treat yourself eg with flowers
- **Eat** proper meals, away from the desk, and **drink** more water
- Get some **exercise** or do yoga every day
- **Be kind to others** – it makes us happier
- Develop a **personal well-being plan**, and find a buddy to work with so you make a commitment with each other



Action 5 – Workplace strategies

Develop a workplace strategy

At an organisational level it's clearly important to address stress, yet despite the evidence of its impact on wellbeing and productivity, ACAS say that more than a quarter of HR managers have no strategy in place to deal with stress or anxiety, despite the evidence of benefits of doing so.

We have a draft strategy to address stress at an organisational level (see diagram overpage). This includes:

- Inviting a range of **stakeholders** to be involved in a creating a strategy
- Identifying the **indicators** of stress, gather data, and survey staff
- Identifying the **causes** of stress – non judgementally
- **Taking action for individuals** at risk
- Developing new **team management** protocols
- Planning group **training** or individual **coaching**



Workplace strategies

Organisational stress management strategy steps

Action plan stage	Key tasks and <i>potential contribution of mindfulness training</i>
Developing a stress action plan and protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A clear plan and protocols should be developed, included in induction activities, and regularly revisited and updated Participation by stakeholders at all levels is recommended in action plan development
Recognising stress-related outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define indicators and signs of stress in individuals and teams Brief all managers to identify and act when signs are evident (<i>mindfulness helps build emotional intelligence</i>) Gather data, for example on: level and reasons for absenteeism, employee wellbeing, productivity outputs etc. & be alert to negative trends
Identifying the causes of stress and risk factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask individuals and team representatives, or hold group action-planning events, to identify causes and risks specific to your organisation/business (<i>hold conversations and run events with mindful listening skills</i>) Note the most common risk factors are: work overload, control, management environment, clarity of role/responsibility, team relationships, and change/restructuring
Taking action for individual cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intervene early with employee reviews, return to work interviews etc (<i>employ mindful coaching approaches</i>) Jointly agree an individual action plan <i>Offer or recommend mindfulness training (workshops or online course)</i> Maintain communication & review progress
Taking action at team and organisational levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hold team interaction events (<i>employ mindful meeting skills</i>) <i>Offer group mindfulness training workshops</i> Encourage informal coaching between team members (<i>using mindful conversation principles</i>)
Monitoring and review of progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hold regular reviews through repeated surveys and from other data, to inform progress in addressing stress Reflect and suggest updates to action plan

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Mindfulness at work

Consider a taking a mindfulness course, or provide one for your employees

Mindfulness programmes have a proven effectiveness record in addressing stress - for example, programmes have been found to:

- Improve **well being** resulting in **less time taken off work** – from research in 2014 at the Psychology and Neuroscience faculty at the University of Colorado - and at Transport for London this led to a 70% drop in time off work for anxiety or stress
- Improve **productivity** and saves money – a study in 2014 at Dow Chemical Company indicated savings of \$22,580 per year per employee
- Help with **work focus** – as identified by 88% of participants in a programme at IF Insurance
- Improve **capacity for multi-tasking** – from a study by University of Washington Seattle, 2012
- Help **people get along better** – eg a study on empathetic concern after brief mindfulness exercises researched by the University of Queensland, Australia, 2014



Mindfulness at work

What is mindfulness?

In essence mindfulness is about **staying fully present with a cool head**. It helps us to be less worried about past events or future scenarios, and helps us **put day to day stresses into perspective**.

Mindfulness works by literally **re-training our brains** to respond differently. It takes about 8 weeks of practice for these new, healthier habits to embed.

The first clear benefit is in helping **reduce anxiety and depression**. The Mental Health Foundation describe mindfulness in a clinical context as follows:

'An integrative, mind body-based approach that helps people change the way they think and feel about their experiences, especially stressful experiences.'

Secondly, one can also look at the positive impacts of mindfulness training. For example, it is well proven that mindfulness **helps people interact better and provides the ground for more creativity, an increase in emotional intelligence, and more sustained energy and good health**.

Mindfulness at work

The unique contribution of mindfulness

Stress is a *reaction* to the world around us. That's why one person may find a certain noise irritating, while for another it is soothing; there is nothing inherent in the sound itself that is either good or bad; it is how we have learnt to process that sound that creates a different effect in each listener.

In fact, the sound that comes into our ear is only a small part, maybe 20%, of the sound we 'hear', which is **processed by the brain**, informed by old **memories** and **pattern** recognition, and then we layer learnt **emotional** responses on to the sense experience.

It's is the way that we take raw sense data and process it, that generates stress. With **training** and practice, we can learn to recognize our old patterns, and that they may be out of date or inappropriate. **We have a choice in how we respond.** Once this insight comes, we can create the space to step back from stress stimuli, respond differently, and set up healthier patterns for the future.

Modern neuroscience shows us that **change is possible**, and that brains have great **plasticity**. That's why taxi driver's brains actually grow in the area responsible for spatial processing. By establishing new neural pathways (or habits), and making them stronger, the new, healthy thought patterns become the default, and the old stress-inducing patterns die out. So we are able to literally **re-programme ourselves to be more resilient and creative.**

Mindfulness training

How is mindfulness training delivered in a workplace context?

The **core practice of 8 weeks training** can't really be short-circuited. There are many mindfulness courses around - but we suggest that you find a teacher with at least 10 years mindfulness practice and with a mindfulness teacher training qualification, so that they have a deep understanding. For the workplace, someone with business or management experience would also be useful.

For many people, it's useful to attend a **taster session** beforehand, to make sure you're clear what mindfulness is, and that you're ready to make the commitment to the training.

At **Mindful Work**, we've specialised in helping adapt this training for the workplace environment. Our range of options includes:

- Workplace **taster sessions, workshops, and 8 week courses**
- However, if you want a course which you can do when it suits you, you might consider our **online courses** (a lot cheaper, and you get lifetime access to the videos, notes, exercises and guided meditations – and include a 10 day free trial period)
- You can get personal **coaching** if you need it, and certification for **CPD**
- For busy execs, we can provide **individual, bespoke training** to suit your needs

You owe it to yourself, your business, and your staff to take action!

About us

About the author

Simon Michaels leads Mindful Work.



Simon is a qualified business advisor, coach and mindfulness trainer who has 18 years' experience of personal mindfulness practice. He has founded and run several successful enterprises and advised many others, offering an entirely practical approach that really makes a difference.

Here's Simon's story:

I spent many years being stressed at work – anxious about all kinds of things at such as workload pressure, getting on with those around me, feeling valued etc. I blamed everything but myself.

So about 18 years ago, I began to get into mindfulness. The more I practised, the more I realised that my stress at work was easing off. It's not that the external stress factors were any less, it was my reaction and response that was changing. As a result, I felt easier, more confident and more resilient, and my work improved too.

So now I've brought my skills as a business advisor and mindfulness trainer together, by helping people do the work they do, but in a calmer, more focused, and more productive way. I've helped organisations from County Councils to third sector, and from business owners to coaches. Over 90% of the people I've worked with say the results are 'significant' or 'amazing'.

References

References in copy

ONS Annual Population Survey, 2012/13

November 2012, Priory Group

<http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk>

The HSE Labour Force Survey 2010/11

Research from Australia and the USA suggests that costs associated with presenteeism it are 2.6 times greater than those of absenteeism.

www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/post-pn-422.pdf, 2012

'London Mental Health - The invisible costs of mental ill health', 2014 , The Mayor of London. Over 900,000 adults of working age in London are affected by disorders such as anxiety and depression. £920 million alone is lost annually to sickness absences in the city, and a further £1.9 billion is lost to reduced productivity.

<http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1993>

BT's mental well-being strategy resulted in a 21.5% reduction in annual mental health related sickness absence between June 2010 and June 2012.

Other useful research on the impacts of mindfulness

McCubbin et al Nov 2014

Research shows **positive impact on physical and mental health, work productivity, and reduction in healthcare utilization** [and hence less time off work], of employees in mindfulness programme, up to one year afterwards.

Aikens, K. A. et al 2014

Web-based Mindfulness-based interventions found to **combat work stress and burnout**. 66 employees in Dow Chemical Company significantly improved their 'resilience, and physical, emotional, and cognitive vigor, and decreased their perceived stress'. A cost-benefit analysis projected possible **cost savings of up to \$22,580 per year per employee** due to decreased employee burnout.

References

Fortney, L et al 2013

A program with 30 clinicians offered 14 hours of mindfulness instruction over a three-day weekend, followed by two 2-hour post-training sessions; this led to '**significant decreases in emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, anxiety, and stress, and significant increases in a sense of personal accomplishment.** All of these differences were **significant at nine-month follow-up.**'

Sharma and Rush, 2014

In a review of 17 research studies of 8 week mindfulness programmes, 16 demonstrated **positive changes .. related to anxiety and/or stress...** mindfulness-based stress reduction appears to be a promising modality for stress management.

Chiesa A, Calati R, Serretti A, 2011

Findings ... provided preliminary evidence suggesting that MMPs could **enhance cognitive functions...** early phases of mindfulness training could be associated with significant improvements in **selective and executive attention**, whereas the following phases could be mainly associated with **improved unfocused sustained attention** abilities.

The Ashridge Journal, 2011

Preliminary findings suggest a significantly upwards shift in general levels of satisfaction for individuals who commit to a period of mindfulness.... 61% noted 'feeling of **calm**', 30% listed '**having time to themselves**', 22% of the items listed related to **improved sleep**, and 22% also cited 'having a **different perspective**'.

IF Insurance, 2010

An independent evaluation of a mindfulness programme found, based on participant's self-assessment, that:

- 88% of participants reporting "a highly **increased ability to stay focused**"
- 76% of participants reporting "highly **increased positive relationships within their teams**".
- 68% of participants reporting "highly **increased personal efficiency and productivity**"
60% of participants reporting "highly increased **ability to counteract stress**"

Transport for London, 2010

After a mindfulness programme with 600 staff, there was a **70% drop in time off work** for anxiety or stress, and a 50% drop in absenteeism for any other reason.

References

Department of Economics University of Warwick, 2011

Happier workers, research found, were 12 percent more productive. Unhappier workers were 10 percent less productive.

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/research/centres/eri/bulletin/2009-10-3/ops/>

Levy et al, University of Washington Seattle, 2012

Mindfulness and meditation training in a high-stress information environment indicated **improved capacity for multitasking, staying on tasks longer, less negative emotion after task performance, and improved memory** for the tasks they performed.

<https://faculty.washington.edu/wobbrock/pubs/gi-12.02.pdf>

What to do next:

Sign up for
one of our
online
mindfulness
courses
(10 day trial)



Contact us
about training
or coaching
for you or
your
organisation



Mindful Work

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