Talking Toolkit
For NHS Service Providers in England
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The case for preventing stress:

- Taking action to tackle stress brings organisational and business benefits; it reduces sickness absence, reduces costs, boosts morale and helps improve productivity.
- The law requires employers to tackle work-related stress.
- Tackling stress prevents ill health.

The earlier a problem is tackled the less impact it will have, as with many things “prevention is better than cure” ... and usually cheaper.

Preventing work-related stress

Across Great Britain, in 2019/20, work-related stress accounted for:

- over half (55%) of all working days lost to ill health;
- an estimated 828000 workers reporting stress, depression or anxiety caused or made worse by work;
- approximately 17.9 million working days lost.

This represents a huge cost to those affected, their employers (costs such as bank staff or agency staff costs) and those providing support and treatment to those made ill. This is a compounding factor for the NHS.

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

It’s important to remember that it’s not the employer’s nor the manager’s role to diagnose stress, whatever its cause. But if an employee is having problems, it’s important that they get help as soon as possible, and as an employer or manager you can help them to do so. This toolkit helps you to have the necessary conversation.

Whether you are a GP practice, a hospital, or a Trust, the law requires every employer to assess the risk of work-related stress and to put measures in place to tackle it.

Managers play an important role in implementing these measures and there are many tools, resources and guides available to help them decide what measures to take (see pages 22 and 23).

Getting started

The starting point is to find out whether you have a problem; this toolkit helps managers hold initial conversations with employees, to gather information needed to move towards preventing work-related stress.

By taking action employers can help create a more engaged, healthy workforce, improve patient care/client services and ensure quality and efficiency.

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

The whole ethos of the NHS and health care sector is to make people well and to keep them healthy both physically and mentally. By tackling stressors, you will be protecting your staff and the patients who use your services.
Using this talking toolkit

This toolkit is designed to help managers and others hold initial conversations with employees as part of the organisation’s overall approach for preventing and managing work-related stress.

The toolkit can also be used by:

- **managers or team leaders as part of their management role:**
  - to understand team dynamics;
  - in performance reviews, sickness absence management or return to work interviews, or one-to-one meetings;
  - to develop ‘reasonable adjustments’ to get colleagues back to work, for example under the Equality Act 2010;
  - in resource and demand planning; or
  - to identify issues at an early stage.

- **the organisation or senior management:**
  - during change management projects;
  - to provide evidence of stressors;
  - to identify good practice that can be shared;
  - to test potential interventions (using it before and after implementation could evaluate interventions).

- **HR:**
  - to investigate where stress is identified or where there are multiple cases of stress;
  - to develop ‘reasonable adjustments’ for people with mental health issues or returning to work following illness;
  - to follow up the results of staff surveys eg checking/comparing results.

- **Occupational Health providers** as a consistent approach to referred cases, whether relating to stress or not.

- **Employee Assistance Programmes** as the basis for information gathering for work-related problems.

When developing solutions, you don’t have to start from scratch; there are many tools, resources and guides available to help decide what measures should be taken (some examples can be found on pages 22 and 23).

The law requires all employers to assess the risk of work-related stress and to put measures 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 its only measure for preventing stress.

If your organisation uses the Management Standards approach to tackling work-related stress you will recognise the topics to be discussed and can see how the feedback from these can help with your organisation’s approach to tackling work-related stress.
Starting the conversation

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

The Talking Toolkit should not be used in isolation but as part of the organisation’s overall approach to wellbeing and reducing work-related stress. It can support managers, helping them have simple, practical conversations with employees.

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

**Conversation 1 – Demands**

This includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment

**Conversation 2 Control**

How much say the person has in the way they do their work

**Conversation 3 – Support**

This includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, management and colleagues

**Conversation 4 – Relationships**

This includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour

**Conversation 5 – Role**

Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles

**Conversation 6 – Change**

How organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation

For each conversation, the first sheet gives the manager a series of questions to start discussions about the causes of stress. The second sheet helps to develop ideas for how to begin tackling causes through discussion and agreement.

There is no strict format for these conversations, or how they should be conducted, and the layout of the toolkit is not prescriptive. You could hold one conversation 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 or team meeting, they could be built into the next training day or a new meeting could be set up solely to talk about stress and mental health and how to prevent problems developing.

You may find that issues recur in different topics or action taken in one topic may have an impact on another. For example, if someone has high demands, the problem can be tackled by reducing those demands, by giving the employee more control over how they carry out the task or providing additional support.
Importantly, employers should make sure that there is time available for managers and employees to have these conversations and that the conversations take place in a suitable setting.

The toolkit also relies on both managers and employees having an open and honest conversation, and the importance of this should be clarified at the outset.

**Top tips for managers holding conversations**

Consider the six conversations and how to effectively explore these topics with your team members.

- ensure everyone can attend and take part in the discussions.
- build trust with your teams.
- be open about the situation.
- be clear about the follow up actions and agree these as far as possible with the team.
- be realistic about what changes you can influence directly (eg team culture).
- be clear what issues need to be fed into and addressed at organisational level.

It is important that managers 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.
What happens next?

The Talking Toolkit is just one step on the journey towards managing work-related stress and mental health issues. Using it can improve the wellbeing of staff and make them more likely to talk about any problems openly, and earlier, protecting their health, including mental health.

If you identify that someone is experiencing stress or a mental health problem, they should be encouraged to talk to someone, whether it's a manager, a trusted peer, their trade union or staff representative, GP or occupational health team.

After you complete the six conversations, you will have built up a picture of the potential work causes of stress in your organisation or team.

Depending on the way you conduct these six conversations you may need to have a mop-up session to discuss the agreed action plans, agreeing who will take the actions forward. As part of this you should check whether there are any other areas that haven't been raised or which may reflect changes since the initial discussion.

Remember, although employers have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work, diagnosing it isn’t their responsibility but taking steps to prevent or tackle the problem is. There are suggestions throughout this toolkit on tackling the issues.

You may decide to implement the Management Standards – HSE’s approach for preventing stress at work. This 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.

You can find out more about the Management Standards on HSE’s website at www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards. The Sources of further advice section points you in the direction of other useful guides, workbooks and tools for both managing and preventing work-related stress.
Conversation One: Demands

How your staff 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, team or department copes at busy times.

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

Have you got the necessary skills, experience and 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 manager, your department, your organisation or trust.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes
Conversation One: Demands

Did you know that in 2018 the Duke of Cambridge launched 'Mental Health at Work' with 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

Working patterns

- Allow/encourage regular breaks, especially when the work is complex or emotionally demanding.
- Consider how flexible working can be used to enable staff to balance their work and personal commitments, while meeting the needs of services.

Workload

- Hold regular meetings, both with individuals (to consider individual issues, eg disabilities and reasonable adjustments) and as a team, to discuss anticipated workloads and staffing arrangements.
- Provide training to help employees prioritise.
- Develop systems to notify employees of unplanned tight deadlines and any exceptional need to work long hours.
- Develop systems to monitor staff overtime and bank shifts.
- Identify blocks of time to allow for genuine collaborative planning between managers and staff.

- If you’re a team leader or supervisor, understand the team’s current workload when discussing the allocation of additional tasks.
- If you’re a team leader or supervisor, ensure you and your team have a clear understanding of escalation procedures where staff or patient safety is at risk.
- Encourage flexible working.

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, make making arrangements not to be alone with previously aggressive patients, or community nurses going to do visits do so in twos.
- Provide training to help employees deal with and defuse difficult situations.
- Take steps to reduce unwanted distraction, disturbance and noise levels.
- Review systems and procedures, eg queuing, triaging policies.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes
Conversation Two: Control

How your staff 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.
- Efforts are appreciated and acknowledged.

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, trusted and valued - how you are consulted and given 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 manager, your department, your organisation.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes.
Conversation Two: Control

TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady said: ‘It’s in no one’s interest to have an overstretched workforce, as anxious employees are less productive and are more likely to take time off.’

Communication
- Help employees to have a say about the way their work is organised and undertaken, for example at project meetings, one-to-ones and performance reviews.
- Hold regular discussion forums during the planning stage of any changes to work to talk about the anticipated methods of working.
- Allocate responsibilities to teams rather than individuals to take projects forward.
- Allow employees to have some control over the pace of their work.
- Talk about training needs.
- Involve a range of staff members in any projects or change initiatives.

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.
- Explore the continuous professional development (CPD) requirements of your team members and how these can be met.

Decisions
- Talk about the way decisions are made, ensuring staff understand how the organisation, department and team make decisions.
- Allow and encourage people to participate in decision making, especially where it affects them.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes
Conversation Three: Support

How your staff should feel

- They receive information and support from colleagues and their managers.
- The organisation has systems in place to enable and encourage managers to support their staff and for colleagues 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 team/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 manager, your team, your department, your organisation.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes.
Did you know that Mind offers free resources to support you and your employees’ mental health at work? Wellness Actions Plans (WAPs) help you to take practical steps to ensure you are supported when you aren’t feeling great.

Research from Mind shows that 30% of employees disagreed with the statement, ‘I would feel able to talk openly with my line manager if I was feeling stressed.’ By discussing these issues and building trust, people may feel more confident to talk about their problems – helping the organisation to tackle them early.

**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 staff and/or performance reviews.
- Consider buddying systems or work shadowing to improve understanding of roles across the team and to foster peer support.
- Find examples of how people would like to receive, or have received, good support from managers or colleagues and share them with others.

**Training**
- Regularly consult with people to ensure training is up to date.
- Hold local induction sessions.

**Environment**
- Assess the risk of physical violence and verbal abuse by consulting with staff and others, such as the police and charities.
- Raise awareness of initiatives already in place.
- Provide training to help employees deal with and defuse difficult situations.

**Resources**
- Share information on support available to your staff, for example employee assistance programmes, trade union support, occupational health and external organisations.
- Talk about the ways your organisation can provide support if someone is experiencing problems outside work.

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**Agreed action plan**

**Set a date to revisit these proposed changes**
How your staff 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, without fear of reprisal.

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 manager, your team, your organisation.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes
Conversation Four: Relationships

The Sources of further advice section includes links to HSE’s free stress risk assessment template, example risk assessments on stress written for small businesses, links to Acas guidance on bullying and Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) guidance on harassment.

In 2019/20, on average, 21.6 working days were lost for every case of stress, anxiety or depression caused or made worse by work.

- 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 staff 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 staff who work in isolation like lone workers or those in separate locations.
- Find ways to celebrate personal, team and organisational successes.
- Ensure managers role model the values and behaviours of the organisation and develop positive cultures within their own team.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes
Conversation Five: Role

How your staff 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 manager, your organisation, your profession, your staff/union representative.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes
Conversation Five: Role

Did you know that stress, anxiety and depression caused or made worse by work account for 55% of all work-related ill health cases in Great Britain?

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

New starters

- Give all new staff 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 or mental health issues.

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 staff to discuss any issues.
- Display departmental/organisational targets and objectives.
- Introduce or revise job descriptions with the involvement of staff 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.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes
Conversation Six: Change

How your staff 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 manager, your organisation, your profession your staff/union representatives.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes
Conversation Six: Change

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

Consulting with staff
- Define and explain key steps of changes being made.
- Consult employees early and throughout the change process.
- Build in engagement and support as key elements of any change process.
- Involve employees 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/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 staff.
- Have an agreed system for communicating to staff why a change is happening.
- Have agreed methods of communication (such as meetings, notice boards, newsletters, email and feedback forms) and agree their frequency.
- Don’t rely on a single communication route – most people may have access to a computer in work but what about those who don’t, or those who work off-site or out in the community?
- 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.
- Include people on long term sickness, maternity/paternity leave or career breaks, where possible.

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

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

**Website:** www.samaritans.org

**Stress**
- What work-related stress is and how to tackle it.
- HSE’s guidance on work-related stress.
- HSE’s Management Standards to prevent work-related stress.
- Mind’s guide to stress and how to manage it.

Healthy Working Lives (Scotland) provide information and guidance on tackling stress in the workplace which includes a free online survey tool. Although this is Scotland centric the content may be useful elsewhere.

**English health service**
- NHS Employers flexible working guide
- NHS health and wellbeing information includes advice on healthy working environments as well as useful toolkits on emotional wellbeing and sickness absence.
- Healthy working environments guidance
- Sickness absence toolkit
- Guidance to support line managers
- Head First mental health tool for ambulance staff.
- Every Mind Matters

**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 on the website here.

Mind’s free Wellness Action Plans are an easy, practical way of helping people to support their own mental health at work.

Business in the Community (BITC) has partnered with Public Health England to produce a toolkit to help every organisation support the mental health and wellbeing of its employees. It will help employers take positive actions to build a culture that champions good mental health and provides a greater understanding of how to help those who need more support. Visit the website here

Heads Together and Mind’s website brings together resources, training, information and tools to make workplace wellbeing a priority.
Violence, bullying and harassment or discrimination

HSE guidance on ways to prevent, manage and respond to complaints of inappropriate behaviour.

Acas advice – Bullying and harassment at work: a guide for managers and employers.

CIPD advice – Harassment and bullying at work.

EHRC advice on tackling discrimination and harassment.

Tools and templates from HSE

HSE’s stress indicator and analysis tools can be used to assess the level of work-related stress within your organisation. This includes an automated version which allows the survey to be conducted wholly online.

An action plan template can be used to plan how your organisation will tackle the identified stressors.

The tools and template are available at the HSE website

Stress risk assessment examples showing how smaller organisations can approach risk assessment the HSE website