HEALTH BASICS

Managing job stress

Managing job stress means identifying work pressures and taking practical steps to reduce their health impact.

WHAT IT IS
Pressure when work demands strain your coping resources

WHERE IT COMES UP
Workload, control, schedules, relationships, support, roles, and change

WHY IT MATTERS
Ongoing strain can affect sleep, mood, body, and safety

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or a diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
Primary care, occupational health, employee assistance, union, or workplace support

HOW IT IS CHECKED
No single test; discussion and validated stress questionnaires

Overview

Job stress is the physical and emotional strain that can arise when work demands exceed the resources, time, control, or support available to you. It is not a disease or a medical diagnosis.

Some pressure at work can be brief and manageable. It may help you focus before a deadline or respond to a difficult situation. The concern is pressure that is intense, keeps returning, or continues without enough opportunity to recover.

Job stress is not only about how well an individual "copes." Working conditions matter. Common sources include excessive workload, long or unpredictable hours, limited control, unclear responsibilities, poor support, bullying, harassment, discrimination, job insecurity, and unsafe conditions.

Stress outside work can also affect how manageable a job feels. Caring responsibilities, financial strain, illness, poor sleep, and major life changes may reduce the energy available for work. This does not mean that workplace problems are your fault.

How it works

When you face pressure, your brain and body start a stress response. Stress hormones increase alertness, heart rate, and energy availability. This response is useful when a challenge is short-lived and followed by recovery.

Problems can develop when demands remain high or recovery is limited. For example, late-night messages may interrupt rest, shift work may disrupt the body clock, and repeated conflict may keep you on guard after the working day has ended.

Your experience of work is shaped by several connected factors:

Personal strategies may help with recovery, but they cannot correct every workplace problem. Relaxation exercises will not make an unsafe workload safe, for example. Effective management may require changes to the work itself as well as support for the person doing it.

- The demands placed on you, including workload and emotional demands
- How much control you have over tasks, timing, and decisions
- The support available from managers and colleagues
- Whether relationships are respectful and safe
- Whether your role and priorities are clear
- How workplace changes are explained and managed

Why it matters for your health

Ongoing work pressure can interfere with sleep, concentration, mood, eating patterns, physical activity, and relationships. It may also make it harder to recover from an existing health condition.

You might notice changes such as dreading work, struggling to switch off, making more mistakes, becoming unusually irritable, or using alcohol or other substances to unwind. These changes do not prove that you have a medical condition. They are reasons to consider what has changed and whether more support is needed.

Workplace conditions can also affect safety. Fatigue, distraction, rushed work, inadequate staffing, or fear of reporting problems may increase the chance of errors or injury. This is especially important in driving, machinery work, health care, construction, and other safety-sensitive roles.

Managing job stress is therefore not simply about feeling calmer. It may involve protecting sleep, reducing harmful demands, improving communication, clarifying responsibilities, or addressing bullying and unsafe practices.

What can go wrong

Persistent job stress can be connected with several health and workplace problems. These are separate conditions or situations, not "stages" of job stress.

Burnout is described by the World Health Organization as an occupational phenomenon caused by chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It involves exhaustion, growing mental distance or negativity toward work, and reduced professional effectiveness. It is not classified as a medical condition.

Depression and anxiety disorders are diagnosable mental health conditions. Work may contribute to them, make them harder to manage, or be affected by them. A clinician considers your wider circumstances rather than assuming work is the only cause.

Insomnia means persistent trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or getting restorative sleep, together with daytime effects. Shift patterns, worry about work, or after-hours contact can contribute.

Harmful alcohol or drug use may develop when substances become a regular way to manage tension, sleep, or difficult feelings. This can worsen sleep, mood, judgement, and workplace safety.

Long-term workplace strain is also associated with physical health concerns, including cardiovascular disease. An association does not mean that stress is the sole cause. Health conditions usually involve several influences, such as age, family history, smoking, activity, sleep, and access to care.

Bullying, harassment, discrimination, violence, and unsafe work are workplace hazards rather than personal coping failures. They may require formal reporting or specialist support.

What you can do

Start by identifying the parts of work that are creating pressure. For one or two weeks, keep a brief private record of:

Avoid recording confidential workplace or patient information on a personal device. A simple pattern log can help you explain the issue without needing to rely on memory.

Choose a specific change to request. Instead of saying only that work is stressful, you might ask which tasks have priority, whether a deadline can change, how after-hours contact should be handled, or who can help with an unsafe workload. Put important agreements in writing.

Depending on your workplace, support may be available through a manager, human resources

team, occupational health service, employee assistance programme, health and safety representative, disability service, professional body, or union. Their roles and confidentiality rules differ, so ask what information will be recorded or shared before giving personal details.

If bullying, discrimination, or unsafe practice is involved, keep factual records of dates, events, witnesses, and reports made. Check your workplace policy and local employment or safety services. Legal rights differ by location.

Protecting recovery can help while broader issues are addressed. Keep work contact within agreed hours when possible, take available breaks, maintain a regular wind-down routine, and avoid relying on alcohol as a sleep aid. These steps may support recovery, but they do not replace workplace changes when the work itself is harmful.

Arrange routine medical follow-up if sleep, mood, concentration, or physical wellbeing remains affected; if work is becoming hard to manage; or if you are increasingly relying on alcohol or drugs. There is no blood test or scan for job stress. A clinician may ask about work and home circumstances, use a validated questionnaire, and check for separate conditions that may need care.

Seek urgent help if you feel unable to keep yourself safe, have thoughts of suicide or self-harm, face immediate violence, or are in immediate danger at work. Contact local emergency services or a crisis service. Sudden chest pressure, severe breathlessness, or fainting also needs emergency assessment rather than being assumed to be stress.

- The task or situation
- When it happened and how long it lasted
- Work hours, breaks, and sleep
- What made the situation better or worse
- Effects on concentration, mood, or functioning

Common questions

Is all pressure at work harmful?

No. Short periods of manageable pressure may feel motivating. Pressure is more concerning when it is excessive, prolonged, unpredictable, unsafe, or not followed by enough recovery.

Can a test measure my job stress?

There is no single diagnostic test. Questionnaires can help describe perceived stress, wellbeing, burnout, anxiety, or depression, but they must be interpreted in context. Workplace

assessments can examine hazards such as workload, control, support, and working hours.

Is burnout the same as depression?

No. Burnout relates specifically to chronic workplace stress and is not classified as a medical condition. Depression can affect most areas of life and is a diagnosable condition. They can overlap, so persistent changes deserve proper assessment.

Should I leave my job?

There is no single answer. Consider immediate safety, whether meaningful changes are possible, your health, finances, and available support. Occupational health, a union, an employment adviser, or a clinician may help you consider options without assuming resignation is the only solution.

What if nothing at work can be changed?

You can still document the problem, ask for a risk assessment or formal review, and seek advice about workplace rights or adjustments. If no practical change is available, support can help you assess safer or more sustainable options. Individual coping techniques alone may not solve harmful working conditions.

Sources

- World Health Organization. WHO guidelines on mental health at work . 2022.
- World Health Organization and International Labour Organization. Mental health at work: policy brief . 2022.
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Mental wellbeing at work, NICE guideline NG212 . Published 2022.
- UK Health and Safety Executive. Work-related stress and how to manage it .
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Stress...At Work, DHHS Publication No. 99-101 . 1999.
- Office of the U.S. Surgeon General. The U.S. Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being . 2022.