

# Gathering data on stress

## Briefing for reps



Your employer will collect various data that you can use to establish whether your organisation has a problem with work-related stress and mental ill health. Both quantitative and qualitative data is useful – quantitative data could tell you about the extent of the problem, while qualitative can add context.

You will find below several datasets that could help paint a picture of the state of mental health in your organisation. It is likely that the human resources department will hold most of this data, but it has been noted below where this is not the case.

Evidence gathered through this fact-finding process can either inform your branch's bargaining agenda to negotiate improvements or, if you are working jointly with your employer, a stress risk assessment. Remember: health and safety representatives have a right to access information held by their employer for the purposes of fulfilling the role's functions.

While you do not have to do extensive analysis, it is a good idea to use more than one data source and look for correlations. Stress is likely to have an uneven effect across an organisation. If possible, compare data among demographic groups – teams, departments, job grades, locations, gender, ethnicity and so on – to see if there are any striking discrepancies. While the absolute number is important, it may be more useful to consider how it compares within the organisation.

### **Sickness absence data**

How much sickness absence is due to stress or mental health problems? Bear in mind that certain factors may mean you cannot take this information at face value: the data may be categorised in an unhelpful way, or employees may feel reluctant to disclose to the employer that a mental health problem or stress was the cause of their absence.

Stress can also cause a range of other health complaints, such as musculoskeletal disorders, digestive problems and headaches. It is therefore possible for an organisation to have a stress problem that is hidden in plain sight. Look for patterns in absenteeism, the types of illnesses people report, their frequency of occurrence, the timing (such as whether it occurs during periods of reported high workload) and any long-term absence.

### **Accident and incident reports**

This is likely to be held by the health and safety department. Stress can affect people's ability to concentrate, and symptoms of stress include difficulty sleeping, which can result in tiredness, potentially contributing to accidents and near misses. Does the data show any pattern to the nature of accidents or incidents? Can incidents be attributed to the effects of stress, such as fatigue or loss of concentration? This may not be explicitly mentioned in the report but consider whether employees made otherwise uncharacteristic "mistakes" or poor judgements.

### **Employee stress or wellbeing survey**

Many employers carry these out, but often only report headline information. Full datasets can be a rich source of information and could give more clarity about which areas of the organisation are struggling with stress and why. If a wellbeing survey has not been carried out, could this be arranged? For instance, the HSE's management standards survey is designed to gather information on people's exposure to recognised stressors.

## Productivity data

Employers can measure productivity or output in various ways, which will dictate which team or department holds the data. Throughput data may be held by an operations department; performance management data may be held by HR. Lower than expected performance, when compared with previous years or between different parts of the organisation, may indicate a problem. For example, working methods, lack of training or unreliable equipment could be causing work-related stress and affecting performance.

## Staff turnover

A higher rate of staff turnover than anticipated in a team or department may indicate a problem. Exit interviews may capture whether stress was a factor in staff members deciding to change jobs. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), one employee in six (16%) resigned from their job in 2019. However, turnover varies considerably from industry to industry, so consider how it compares between demographics within the organisation.

## Occupational health or employee assistance programme data

Most organisations that have occupational health provision or employee assistance programmes collect anonymised information about the number of people referred to the services with work-related stress or associated conditions.

## Disciplinary or complaint data

Have stressors, such as bullying and harassment, lead to complaints and disciplinaries? For example, if a manager is treating people unfairly or is unable to control workloads coming to their team, it can lead to disputes that could result in disciplinary action. It could also result in poor customer service that also leads to complaints.

## Union data

The union is likely to hold, or could gather, valuable information on stress and mental health. For instance, consider:

- **Personal casework** – do personal case handlers report that members have expressed concerns about stress or issues that might cause stress, like bullying or excessive workload? Any number is a cause for concern, but do most personal cases arise in certain teams, or among particular grades?
- **Survey members** – there are many off the shelf surveys, such as the HSE's management standards surveyed mentioned above, that can be used to gauge the extent of stressful working practices. If you are interested in carrying out a survey, speak to your FTO.
- **Speak to members** – can this be done either formally or informally, or incorporated into health and safety reps' existing activities?
  - Inspections – observing work processes may offer an opportunity to assess whether there are any obvious aspects of the job are causing excessive pressure, such as the way it is done, the pace of work or the working conditions.
  - “Talk-throughs” – ask someone to describe what happens when a task is carried out, and whether it has the potential to cause stress.
  - Union meetings – arrange a time to allow members to talk about their stress-related problems and develop potential solutions. During meetings, you could use body or workplace mapping to uncover symptoms or hazards that people quietly struggle with or are reluctant to talk about. For more information, download Prospect's factcard on body mapping: <http://bit.ly/body-mapping>