

Talking Toolkit

Preventing work-related stress in schools



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Introduction for school leaders

Starting the conversation about stress and mental health is an important first step

Employers have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work by doing a risk assessment and acting on it

Tackling stress prevents ill health

Tackling stress brings business benefits

Across Great Britain, work-related stress accounts for almost half of all working days lost and, in the last 12 months, over half a million working days were lost in secondary schools due to stress, depression or anxiety, caused or made worse by work.

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.

The law requires employers to tackle work-related stress and, by taking action in your school, you can help create a more engaged, healthy workforce and save money. Schools have reported improvements in productivity, retention of staff and a reduction in sickness absence after tackling work-related stress.

It's important to remember that it isn't your job to diagnose or treat stress, and there are many existing tools, resources and guides for what to do once you suspect that you or a colleague is experiencing stress (see pages 21 and 22).

We've launched the Talking Toolkit to help school leaders start the conversation, because it is an important first step toward preventing work-related stress and actions employers need to take to comply with the law.

If you think that a colleague is experiencing stress, encourage them to talk to someone, whether it's their trade union representative, GP, headteacher or an occupational health team.

Using your Talking Toolkit

The Talking Toolkit is designed to be used as a framework to help line managers have simple, practical conversations with school employees. It should not be used as a sole response to an existing problem with work-related stress in your school.

The toolkit has six templates for six different conversations, each with a different theme designed to get you 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 template for questions to provoke a conversation with your employee about causes of stress. The second sheet will help the line manager think of ideas for how to begin tackling any causes.

There is no strict format for how line managers should have these conversations, or how many of them you should have, and the layout of the toolkit is not prescriptive. You could have one a week or one a month. You could focus on just one topic, or cover all six.

The conversations can fit into existing one-to-one meetings you have with colleagues, you could build them into your next inset day or you could set up a new meeting solely to talk about stress and how to prevent it. Importantly, you should make sure that there is time available for line managers and employees to have these conversations.

The toolkit relies on both line managers and colleagues having an open and honest two-way conversation. Line managers should listen to what is being said rather than trying to offer excuses or explanations, and agree action points and solutions together. The important thing is to start talking and to start planning.

Conversation 1 Demands

Conversation 2 Control

Conversation 3 Support

Conversation 4 Relationships

Conversation 5 Role

Conversation 6 Change



What happens next?

You should have started to build a picture of what the potential causes of stress are in your school

The Talking Toolkit can form just one step on your journey towards preventing work-related stress and bringing in the suitable and sufficient measures needed to address the risks of stress and help your school to comply with the law.

After you complete the six conversations, you should have started to build a picture of what the potential causes of stress are in your school.

There are ideas throughout this toolkit on how you can tackle the issues. You may decide to implement the Management Standards, HSE's established and recognised approach for preventing stress at work.

The standards help identify and manage the six causes of stress at work and require the management team and all staff across the school to work together (see page 21).

You could also involve your colleagues in the conversation by organising focus groups, surveys and working groups to identify solutions which are relevant to your school.

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, headteacher, their trade union representative, GP or an occupational health team.

Remember, although employers have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work, diagnosing or treating stress isn't yours or your colleagues' responsibility.

The 'Sources of further advice' section (pages 21 and 22) 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 employee/colleague 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 colleague.

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

Do you feel the deadlines you are given and your lesson planning requirements are realistic?

Do you have concerns about the work environment at your school? Think about any hazards, violence or harassment (from pupils or parents) and how this impacts on you.

What changes and support could be put in place to help you to cope with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about: you, your manager/head of department, SLT.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation One: Demands

Remember, Ofsted does not expect to see any specific frequency, type or volume of marking and feedback; these are for the school to decide through its feedback and assessment policy.

Remember, Ofsted does not require schools to provide individual or previous lesson plans to inspectors, or in any particular format.

Workload

- Hold regular meetings to discuss anticipated workloads (and to deal with any predicted busy times).
- Provide training to help staff 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 proper collaborative planning.
- Make high-quality resources and curriculum plans easily accessible.
- Clearly explain why data is being collected and how it will help improve the quality of teaching.
- Make sure that marking is meaningful, manageable and linked directly to its impact on pupil progress.

- Consider the workload impact of each new initiative before it is introduced.
- Consider introducing a work/life balance policy.
- Review the Department for Education's Workload Reduction Toolkit (see page 22).

Environment

- Assess the risk and impact of physical violence.
- Take steps to deal with the risk of physical violence and verbal abuse by consulting with employees and others, ie the police, charities etc.
- Provide training to help staff deal with, and defuse, difficult situations.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Two: Control

How your employee/colleague should feel

- They are consulted over the way their work is organised and undertaken, eg 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 encouraged to develop new skills and undertake new and challenging pieces of work.

Go through the following questions with your colleague.

Do you feel involved in how decisions 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?

Do you feel you have control over how you teach? Think about how you plan lessons, structure your day and provide feedback to pupils.

What changes and support could be put in place to help you to cope with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about: you, your manager/head of department, SLT.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Two: Control

Remember, Ofsted does not specify how planning should be set out, the length of time it should take or the amount of detail it should contain.

Remember, Ofsted does not expect tutor groups/ form-time to include literacy, numeracy or other learning sessions. Schools can use form-time as they wish.

Decisions

- Have systems in place that enable staff to have a say over the way their work is organised and undertaken, eg through project meetings, one-to-ones and performance reviews.
- Hold regular discussion forums during the planning stage of new schemes of work, projects or pieces of work to talk about the anticipated methods of working.
- Allocate responsibility to teams rather than individuals to take projects forward.
- 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 whether 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 staff to think about the skills they would like to develop.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Three: Support

How your employee/colleague should feel

- They receive information and support from their colleagues, head of department and SLT.
- The school 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 and when 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 colleague.

Do you feel that your school is a positive place to work and that you are valued? Think about the working environment, the personal and administrative 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 have enough opportunities to discuss any emerging issues or pressures?

What changes and support could be put in place to help you to cope with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about: you, your manager/head of department, SLT.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Three: Support

Did you know that Mind offer free resources to support your own and your colleagues' mental health at work? Wellness Actions Plans (WAPs) help you to put practical steps in place to ensure you are supported when you aren't feeling great.

The Education Support Partnership is a UK charity dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of the education workforce. They offer a free, confidential helpline, grants to support staff experiencing financial issues and guidance on handling stress and managing work/life balance (see page 21).

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 staff meetings and/or performance reviews.
- Seek examples of how people would like to, or have received, good support from managers or colleagues.

Resources

- Share information on other areas of support available, ie charities, local authority/academy trust, external organisations.
- Talk about the ways the school could provide support if someone is experiencing problems outside work.

Training

- Regularly consult with people to ensure training is up to date.
- Offer training in basic counselling skills or access to counsellors.

Environment

- Assess the risk and take steps to deal with the impact of physical violence and verbal abuse by consulting with employees and others, ie the police, charities etc.
- Provide training to help staff deal with, and defuse, difficult situations.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Four: Relationships

How your employee/colleague should feel

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

Go through the following questions with your colleague.

Have you experienced or witnessed unacceptable behaviour at work such as bullying, harassment or violence? Did you feel satisfied with how this was dealt with?

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

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 changes and support could be put in place to help you to cope with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about: you, your manager/head of department, SLT.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Four: Relationships

Remember, Ofsted has no expectation that schools need to have policies relating to staff behaviour in any particular format. This is up to the school to decide upon.

Did you know that the National Education Union (NEU) has a model harassment and bullying policy?

www.teachers.org.uk/help-and-advice/self-help/b/bullying

- Have an agreement with staff 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 with staff.
- Have a confidential system for people to report unacceptable behaviour.
- Encourage good communication and provide training to help with this, ie listening skills, confidence building, assertiveness etc.
- Encourage or provide opportunities for staff to socialise together.
- Provide support for staff who work in isolation, ie in a separate building, annexe etc.
- Identify ways to celebrate success.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Five: Role

How your employee/ colleague should feel

- They understand their role and responsibilities.
- The school provides information to enable them to understand their role and all of their responsibilities.
- The school ensures that the requirements it places upon them are clear.
- The school has systems in place to enable them to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities.

Go through the following questions with your colleague.

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 department and the school? Do you feel they are achievable?

Do you feel you understand how work is structured in your department and in the wider school? Do you know who is doing what and why?

What changes and support could be put in place to help you to cope with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about: you, your manager/head of department, SLT.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Five: Role

Did you know that the Department for Education has a standard for teachers' professional development including a description of effective practice?

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/standard-for-teachers-professional-development>

Remember, Ofsted inspectors do not expect school leaders to set teacher performance targets based on commercially produced predictions of pupil achievement, or any other data set, from which they would then hold teachers to account.

New starters

- Give all new teachers and staff members a thorough induction to your school and its policies and procedures.

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 colleagues to discuss any issues.
- Display departmental/school targets and objectives.

Role

- Introduce personal work plans which are aligned to the objectives of the department/school.
- Introduce or revise job descriptions to ensure the core functions and priorities are clear.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Six: Change

How your employee/colleague should feel

- The school 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 colleague.

Do you feel that your school 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 changes and support could be put in place to help you to cope with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about: you, your manager/head of department, SLT.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Six: Change

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

Communication

- Explain what the school wants to achieve and why it is essential that the change takes place.
- Explain timescales and how changes will impact directly on them.
- Have an agreed system for communicating to staff why a change is happening.
- Have agreed methods of communication, eg meetings, notice boards, letters, email, feedback forms, and their frequency.
- Make sure that staff are aware of the impact of the change being made on their jobs.

Consultation

- Define and explain the key steps of the change being made.
- Consult staff at an early stage and throughout the change process.
- Build in consultation and support as key elements of any change process.
- Involve staff 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.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes



Sources of further advice

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

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

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

Website:
www.samaritans.org

Stress

HSE's guidance on work-related stress: www.hse.gov.uk/stress

Mind has guidance on stress and how to manage it: <https://www.mind.org.uk>

The Education Support Partnership offer a free, confidential helpline, grants to support staff experiencing financial issues and guidance on handling stress and managing work/life balance.
Tel: 08000 562 561.
<https://www.educationsupport.org.uk>

Mental health

Mind offer extensive free resources, guidance and toolkits for supporting the mental health of your staff. Their free to download Wellness Action Plans are an easy, practical way of helping people to support their own mental health at work, and to help managers support the mental health of their team members: <https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-your-staff/employer-resources/wellness-action-plan-download/>

Time to Change offer free resources for talking to pupils about mental health and supporting young people with mental health problems: <https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/get-involved/get-involved-in-schools>

The NASUWT offers wellbeing audits for members to use: <https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/advice/health-safety/wellbeing-at-work-audits.html>

Violence and harassment

HSE defines work-related violence as any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work. Schools should ensure they have clear policies and procedures which set out how they will prevent, manage and respond to work-related violence: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/violence/>

ACAS advice – Bullying and harassment at work: a guide for managers and employers: <https://www.acas.org.uk/handling-a-bullying-harassment-discrimination-complaint>

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

The NEU has a model harassment and bullying policy: <https://neu.org.uk/bullying>

Workload

The Department for Education’s ‘Reducing workload in your school’ can help you and your school to review and streamline workload through collaborative discussion: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/school-workload-reduction-toolkit>

A poster and pamphlet developed by teachers working with the Department for Education and Ofsted offers tips on reducing teacher workload regarding marking, planning and resources and data management, following three independent reviews of these areas of workload: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teacher-workload-poster-and-pamphlet>

The Department for Education’s Workload Reduction Toolkit gives practical advice and tools for school leaders and teachers to help review and reduce workload: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/reducing-school-workload>

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 school: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/downloads.htm>

HSE’s stress risk assessment examples give examples of how smaller organisations can approach such a risk assessment: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/risk-assessment.htm>



Further information

For information about health and safety, or to report inconsistencies or inaccuracies in this guidance, visit www.hse.gov.uk. You can order HSE priced publications at <https://books.hse.gov.uk>

HSE priced publications are also available from bookshops.

This publication is available on the HSE website at www.hse.gov.uk/stress/talking-toolkit.htm

This guidance is issued by the Health and Safety Executive. Following the guidance is not compulsory, unless specifically stated, and you are free to take other action. But if you do follow the guidance you will normally be doing enough to comply with the law. Health and safety inspectors seek to secure compliance with the law and may refer to this guidance.

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