

# Stress at work

A guide for UNISON safety reps

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## Definition and introduction

Work related stress is defined by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) as the “adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them” (HSE Guide: “Managing the causes of work-related stress”, see appendix for details). This distinguishes between the beneficial effects of reasonable pressure and challenge, which can be stimulating and motivating, and work related stress, which is the natural but distressing reaction to demands or work pressures that an individual perceives they cannot cope with.

Although its causes may vary, stress is an issue that affects nearly all workplaces. This guide seeks to explain to safety reps what they need to know to represent, negotiate, campaign and organise around stress. It explains:

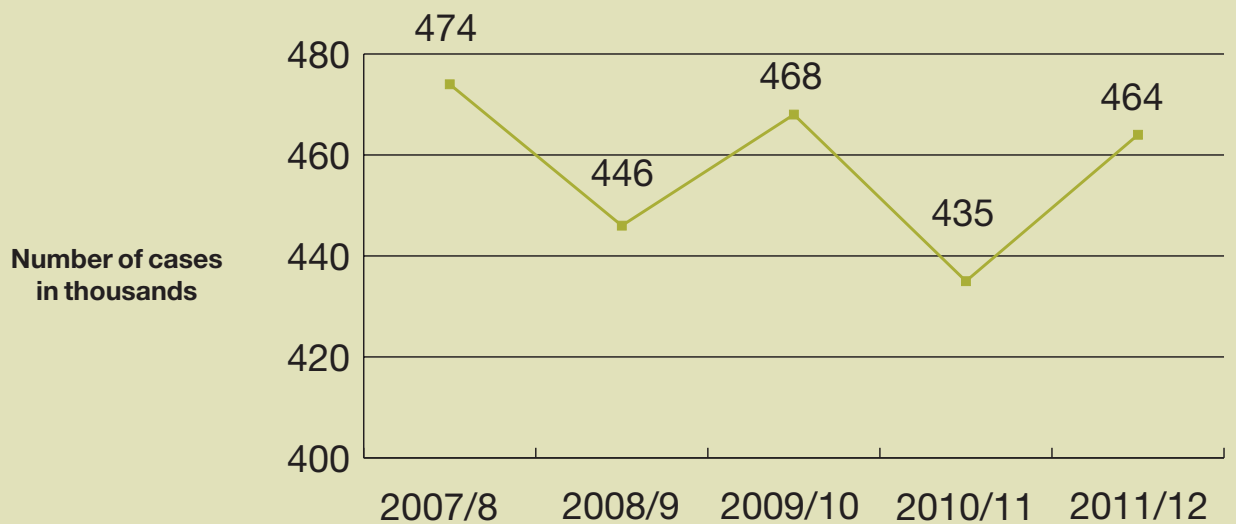
- the causes and symptoms of stress
- what the law says
- what should be included in an employer’s stress management policy
- what the HSE’s Stress Management Standards are and why they are important
- how to set up a stress “steering group”
- how to conduct a risk assessment using the Stress Management Standards
- what support should be provided for stressed workers (including a section on combating the “resilience” agenda)
- how, using a case study, to campaign and organise around stress.

## Work-related stress: facts and figures

Stress levels: The 2014 survey of UNISON safety reps showed stress to be their number one cause of concern in the workplace. 92% said that stress was among their top five concerns with 42% saying it was their number one cause of concern.

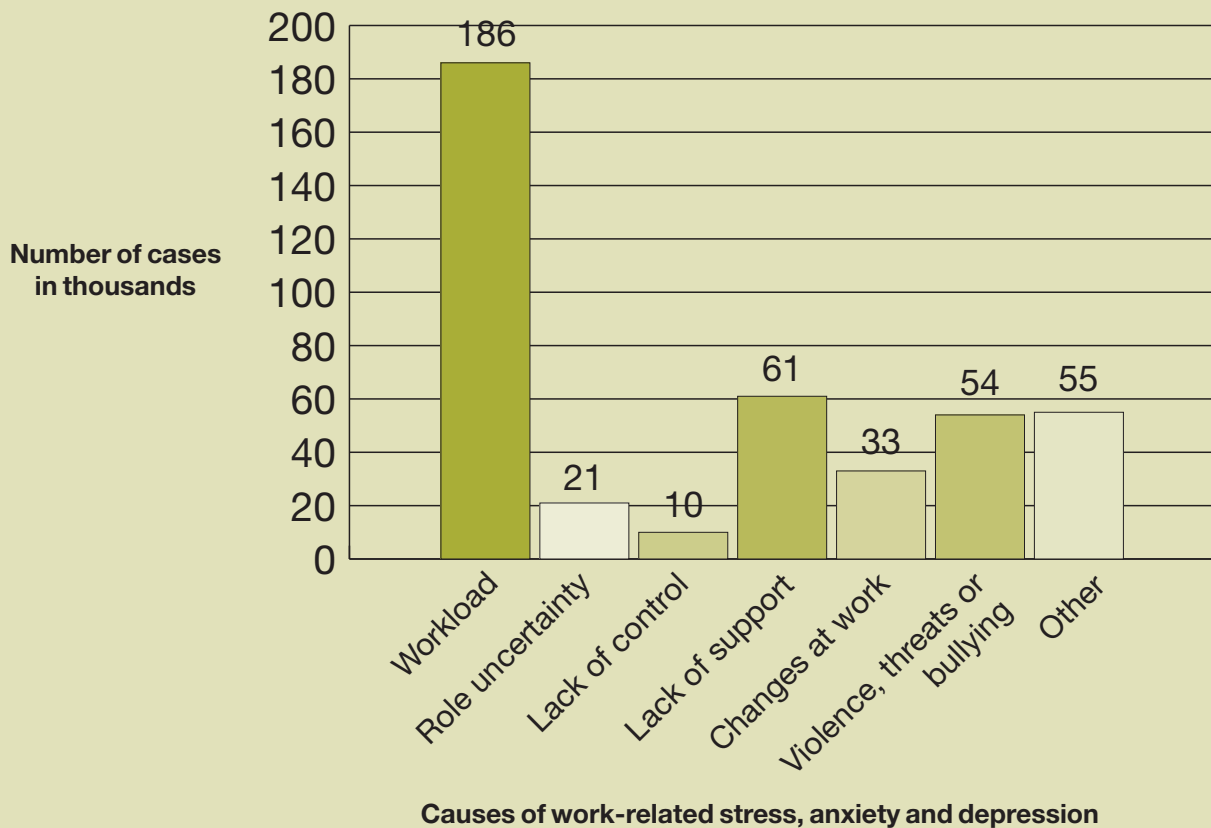
In addition although in the earlier part of this millennium cases of work-related stress appear to fall, such cases have risen sharply since 2010 (see figure 1).

**Figure 1: Number of self reported cases of stress, anxiety and depression**



## Causes of stress

**Figure 2: 2012 HSE Labour Force Survey: Causes of work-related stress**



The increase in stress related cases in recent years has coincided with cuts in public services and job losses. As well as causing anxiety and uncertainty among the workforce it has also led to increases in workloads with fewer staff being asked to do more. As the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) figures (see figure 2) demonstrate, the number one cause of stress is increases in workload. However, they also show that lack of support and control, changes at work, role uncertainty and violence and bullying (all possible symptoms of job cuts) are significant factors.

Other causes of stress could include:

- low pay
- unrealistic targets or deadlines
- shiftwork
- poor management
- bad relations with other colleagues
- repetitive work, boredom and lack of job satisfaction
- working alone
- a poor working environment (such as excessive noise, the presence of dangerous materials, overcrowding, poor facilities, or extremes of temperature or humidity).

## Symptoms of stress and cost to employers and society

In addition the HSE Labour force survey shows that over the last five years nearly 56 million working days have been lost to stress related illnesses. Although these figures fell between 2007/8 and 2009/10 from well over 13 million to just under 10 million they have started to rise again to over 10 million for both 2010/11 and 2011/12.

In addition there are the costs of presenteeism (ie. staff attending work when they are not fit to do so). The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health estimates presenteeism costs 1.8 times more than absenteeism (see appendix for details).

Stress can manifest in a variety of symptoms including:

- changes in behaviour
- unusual tearfulness, irritability or aggression
- indecisiveness
- increased sickness absence
- poor timekeeping
- reduced performance
- inability to concentrate
- overworking or failure to delegate
- erosion of self-confidence
- relationship problems, for example, becoming withdrawn or argumentative with colleagues
- increased unwillingness to co-operate or accept advice
- excessive smoking or drinking
- drug abuse
- anxiety and depression
- panic attacks
- other health complaints such as headaches, raised blood pressure, indigestion, muscle tension and increased heart rate.

## What the law says

Employers have the same legal requirement to manage work-related stress as they have with any other hazard. UNISON has been at the forefront of taking civil cases for damages for stress at work, and has had some success. However, winning such a stress related claim is not easy, and avoiding the harm caused by stress is preferable to compensating it. Therefore it is better to use the law to negotiate improved agreements and working conditions with your employer rather than resort to risky and costly legal actions which may or may not be successful.

The **1974 Health and Safety at Work Act** requires employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees. **The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999** requires employers to assess the risks of ill health (including stress related conditions) arising from work-related activities, ensuring that the hazards are removed or proper control measures are put in place to reduce the risk so far as is reasonably practical. This is defined by the HSE as “balancing the level of risk against the measures needed to control the real risk in terms of money, time or trouble”.

For information generally on how to conduct a risk assessment you should read “Risk assessment, a guide for UNISON safety reps”. See also HSE web pages on “Controlling the risks” (see appendix for details of both).

Other legislation that may be relevant to work related stress includes:

- **The Working Time Regulations 1998:** these place limits on the length of the working day and week, and make paid holidays a legal entitlement. These requirements may alleviate some of the worst causes of stress – long hours and a lack of rest. Detailed information on these regulations is available on the UNISON website (see appendix for details).

- **The Equality Act 2010:** stress may be a symptom of an underlying condition that could amount to a disability. Under the Equality Act employers are required, in such an eventuality, to make reasonable adjustments to the workplace, such as reducing an employee’s workload where they are under stress. For further advice on health and safety and disability read the UNISON guide, Disability Health and Safety (see appendix for details). In addition the sex discrimination provisions of this act may be used where stress is caused by for example, a male line manager treating female staff in an overbearing and dominating way. Similarly the race discrimination provisions may be used where stress is caused by a manager treating an employee in a discriminatory way on the grounds of their race. For further information on all forms of discrimination and the 2010 Equality Act please see appendix.

- **The Protection from Harassment Act 1997:** this may be relevant where stress is caused by harassment.

For further advice on what is required to win a legal case on work-related stress, including details of landmark cases (such as the UNISON case Walker vs. Northumberland County Council), please go to the Thompsons Website (see appendix for details).

## Stress management policies and what they should contain

A stress management policy signals that your employer is committed to meeting its' legal obligations of reducing and minimising stress. It must be compliant with the relevant health and safety and equality legislation. It should be based on the HSE's stress "Management Standards" or its equivalent (see below), and the outcome of a robust risk assessment. The policy can also assist in creating a more open climate for discussing stress, its causes and the rehabilitation of those suffering from stress.

What is considered a good policy will depend on the context of where you are working. This includes:

- the type of employer you are working for
- the type of work you are employed in.

In addition the greater the organising strength of your branch the more robust the policy is likely to be in defending the health and welfare of your members.

Any stress policy should be agreed and developed in partnership with UNISON and contain the following:

- an agreed working definition of stress
- a recognition that stress is a health and safety issue
- statements defining both the legal and moral responsibilities of employers, senior staff (eg the chief executive), managers and workers
- a recognition of the legal rights and role of trade unions and trade union safety reps;
- a commitment from senior staff to implementing the policy, tackling stress and its underlying causes
- support and training for managers in managing stress
- support and services for workers suffering from

work-related stress. This could include:

- reduction of workload
- change of duties
- change of working environment
- time off work
- counselling and other support services.
- a date for a review of the policy.

## Using the stress "Management Standards"

In order to help employers risk assess, identify and manage the causes of stress the HSE has developed the stress "Management Standards". These cover the six potential stressors that if not properly managed, are likely to lead to "poor health and well-being, lower productivity and increased sickness absence" (see HSE publication "Managing the causes of work-related stress", p.6, see appendix for details). These six stressors are:

1. **Demands:** workloads, conflicting priorities, unrealistic deadlines, emotional demands
2. **Control:** how much say a worker has in the way they do their work
3. **Support:** the support and encouragement workers get from their employer, manager and colleagues
4. **Relationships:** this includes a positive working environment, and procedures for managing conflicts and dealing with unacceptable behaviour
5. **Role:** managers ensuring workers understand their roles and that that these roles do not conflict
6. **Change:** how employers manage and communicate organisational change including consultation.



Although these standards are not mandatory they are designed to help employers measure how well they are performing in managing the potential causes of work-related stress. If your employer is not using the “Management Standards” they will be required to provide alternative key performance indicators, and carry out a similar level of analysis. The TUC and UNISON have campaigned and lobbied for all employers to implement the “Management Standards” as a minimum benchmark to managing stress in the workplace.

## Setting up a steering group and developing a stress management programme

It is important that implementing the Management Standards (or their equivalent) does not become a tick box exercise. One of the first practical steps an organisation can take, as both the TUC and HSE recommend, is to set up a group to oversee a stress management programme, i.e. a programme of work aimed at identifying, managing and preventing the causes of work-related stress.

This joint trade union/employer steering group could be the existing health and safety committee, or a group set up specifically for this purpose. However if it is a separate group it is essential that it contains trade union representation and should in some way be accountable to the joint health and safety committee. HSE guidance describes in detail the roles and responsibilities of the different parts of an organisation that could be a part of such a group. These include:

1. **Senior management** (eg chief executive officers - CEOs) - have a duty to understand what work-related stress is, to champion, lead by example and to ensure resources are provided to tackle stress.
2. **Health and safety managers** responsible for ensuring that the risk of work-related stress is properly identified and managed.

3. **Human resources** – responsible for ensuring that the necessary policies and procedures are developed, implemented, and communicated to staff (through their line managers).
4. **Line managers** – responsible for, within the work places they manage, implementing the policies and procedures, carrying out the necessary risk assessments and engaging, communicating and raising awareness about stress.
5. **Occupational health services** – responsible for working with individuals who are experiencing work related stress and helping them remain at, or return to, work successfully. They also have a role in supporting the organisation by providing access to information and helping identify particular problems or trends that may need to be addressed.
6. **Employees and their trade union representatives** – employees should be aware of, and co-operate with their managers in the implementation of their organisation’s policies and procedures. They should also be encouraged to raise any concerns with both their manager and trade union safety rep about possible problems and sources of stress. Trade union representatives are urged to encourage their employers to tackle stress and work with them in developing policies and procedures to tackle stress, and engage and communicate with their members.

## Risk assessment

Employers have a duty to risk assess work-related stress as they do any other hazard. A risk assessment is a way of identifying the hazards or things that may cause harm, assessing the likelihood (risk) of these hazards causing harm, and then putting in place all “reasonably practical” steps to avoid and minimise them. This is often summarised as a five step approach. The HSE stress “Management Standards” have been designed to

follow the five steps risk assessment process. Each of the six potential stressors should be considered at each step of the risk assessment process.

1. Identify the hazards: These can be identified by carrying out a stress management survey. To assist with this, the HSE has developed a "Management standards indicator tool" (see appendix for details). Hazards can also be identified through workplace inspections. For example, employers will need to ensure that workloads and unrealistic deadlines do not cause excessive demands. Other stress related hazards to look out for in a workplace inspection include:

- noise levels
- poorly lit rooms including lack of natural light
- poorly designed or inappropriate machinery, including Information technology (IT) equipment
- temperature and ventilation.

2. Decide who might be harmed: Sickness absence records may indicate those work areas where staff are having time off with stress related illnesses. However managers should also look out for workers exhibiting the symptoms of stress (see pages 4-5 above). Staff who are vulnerable may include those who:

- are affected by organisational change
- are vulnerable because they are working alone or in isolated environments with little support
- have little control over their working lives.

3. Evaluate the risk: when evaluating the risks, employers will need to look at what preventive measures are in place. As with any risk assessment employers are required to apply the principles of risk prevention. This means employers must focus on preventing and managing the root causes of work-related stress. These include managing workloads by developing work plans, adjusting work patterns to cope with peaks and staff absences, and, if necessary, recruiting more staff. They must also focus on organisational level issues that have the

potential to impact on large numbers rather than just focus on individual employees. They will for example need to consider:

- whether staff are getting sufficient support from their supervisors or managers
- whether staff understand their roles
- the relationships between colleagues and the mechanisms for resolving conflict between staff.

For more information on the principles of risk prevention read "Risk assessment: a guide for UNISON Safety Reps", (see appendix for details.)

4. Record their findings (and implement them): recording findings means your employer will have a bank of information to act upon. This information should be shared with the local trade unions. Your steering group or joint health and safety committee will be able to use this information to develop a stress management programme. You should ensure a report on the implementation of HSE stress Management Standards (or their equivalent) becomes a regular standing item for the joint health and safety committee.

5. Monitor and review: the stress risk assessment should be a live document and updated as workplaces, staff and technology change. The joint health and safety committee will need to regularly review whether:

- control measures have been properly implemented
- they are working effectively
- they are still valid
- anything has changed.

## Support for stressed workers

Employers have a duty to provide support for staff identified as suffering from work-related stress. Too often workers suffering from stress are signed off sick for long periods of time with little support from their employer. In many cases they are then eventually forced out the workplace through ill health or early retirement, or in some cases, dismissal on capability grounds. However with the right type of support there is no reason why a worker should not be able to return to work. This support could include measures such as phased return and changes to the job. For more information on support for workers who are off sick read the UNISON guide “Making sickness absence policies work better for Us” (see appendix).

Adopting an organisational approach to stress does not mean ignoring individual personal requirements and needs. The main focus of managers should always remain tackling the underlying causes of work-related stress. However, we are all individuals and sometimes we cannot ignore non-work related issues and how these may interact with work-related stress. Meeting individual requirements should be part of an organisational approach to tackling stress. For example, staff may have care commitments that are impacting on their ability to manage their work. It is difficult for them to concentrate on their jobs if they are worried about whether a sick loved one is getting the care they require. An employer may therefore want to consider protocols for agreeing flexible working patterns which may help staff manage their non-work related issues without impacting on their ability to do their job.

**Combating the “resilience” agenda:** stress is a health and safety issue and requires an organisational approach to manage it.

However, some employers are concentrating on making workers more resilient rather than focus on tackling the underlying causes of stress. UNISON and other trade unions are wary of this approach. It shifts responsibility away from the employer to that of the individual worker. In some cases workers that

are not considered sufficiently “resilient” may be forced out of work.

Some employers have introduced “stress intervention programmes” with initiatives such as lunchtime yoga and exercise classes. These may be popular with staff and there is nothing intrinsically wrong with such activities. They provide a brief distraction from the day to day pressures of work. There is no evidence they have any lasting effect on the individual’s ability to cope with stress and they do not tackle issues of high workload and pressures of deadlines.

At times it may be legitimate for employers to help workers develop coping mechanisms to deal with what are considered reasonable demands of a job. Many UNISON members are doing jobs that involve dealing with emotionally traumatic situations. It is reasonable for employers to train such workers to develop coping mechanisms for dealing with these events. For example, nursing staff as part of their training may be taught how to cope with bereavement following the death of patients. Emergency services workers may require post traumatic stress counselling in the wake of disasters that resulted in widespread loss of life and injury. Similarly, social workers who deal with child sex abuse cases may require counselling.

These are perfectly legitimate initiatives to cope with the reasonable demands of the job but they should not be used as an excuse to impose ‘unreasonable’ demands on workers.

In the previous examples staff are still less likely to be able to cope with such emotional demands if they are providing services that are under-staffed and working for employers who do not provide the support required.

In reality there are very few workers who would not suffer ill health in the long term if stressors are continually piled upon them. Teaching coping mechanisms to reasonable demands should be part of, rather than detracting from, the employer’s underlying responsibility to eliminate and minimise hazards and manage risk.

## Campaigning and organising around stress

Branches can encourage and put pressure on management to meet their legal and moral obligations by campaigning and organising around stress. In addition campaigns against stress, as the case study below demonstrates, are effective workplace organising and recruiting tools.

### Case study

#### **Background**

*We were receiving increasing reports, from our safety reps, of members having time off with stress related illnesses. More worryingly there was also evidence of people still coming into work but demonstrating symptoms of stress such as overworking, lack of concentration and arguing with colleagues. There was an increase in cases of bullying, and the perpetrators were not normally the type of people you would associate with such behaviour. However, management refused to acknowledge that there was a problem. They did not believe that there was sufficient evidence to justify diverting resources to a problem which in their opinion did not exist.*

#### **What we did**

*We were not happy with this, but we decided that the best thing to do was to take up the challenge and show them the evidence. We then did our own survey of our members based on the HSE's Stress Management Indicator Tool (see appendix). We used the "traffic light" system with red indicating an area that management needed to address. That was all we needed. After we showed the evidence to management they had no choice but to take us seriously.*

#### **Results of the survey and hazards identified**

*The survey showed the organisation was "red" in terms of "relationships", "demands", "roles" and "change".*

**Relationships:** *one of the biggest issues was bullying. Senior management spoke to managers and addressed any specific issues regarding their behaviour, and also ensured that they received the training required. In particular, guidance was provided on managing team meetings and ensuring that all views were heard, and that nobody felt excluded.*

**Demands and Roles:** *roles and workloads were reviewed and there was a re-allocation of duties between teams to ensure there was a fairer distribution of work.*

**Change:** *there was evidence, that because of the confusion caused by organisational change' personal development plans (PDPs) had been overlooked. Managers were instructed to ensure that PDPs were prioritised and not overlooked.*

#### **Campaigning and organising**

*We found stress to be a really good recruiting and organising tool as it was an issue all our members felt strongly about. On the back of all this work our branch also launched a "NO! To Over Work" campaign and distributed leaflets to all our members. This helped us recruited 16 new activists!*

*The work we did on stress showed that trade unions can really made a difference and why it pays to be part of the union.*

## Safety rep checklist

1. Does your employer have a stress management policy?
  - If yes check the following:
    - When was it agreed?
    - Does it need updating?
    - Was it developed in partnership with UNISON?
    - Does the policy contain a definition of stress?
    - Does it recognise stress as a health and safety issue?
    - Does it recognise the employer's roles in managing the work-related causes of stress?
    - Does it recognise and endorse the role of UNISON safety reps?
    - Does your employer recognise and use the HSE's Stress Management Standards?
    - Does it include support for staff suffering from work-related stress?
2. Has your employer set up a Steering Group to oversee the implementation of the standards?
  - If yes does this group:
    - Report to and is it accountable to the Joint Health and Safety Committee?
    - Contain UNISON trade union representation?
    - Include representation from senior management?
3. Has your employer risk assessed stress? If yes when did this last take place?
4. Was the risk assessment based on the stress Management Standards?
5. Has your employer or your branch conducted a stress management survey?
  - If yes:
    - When did this last take place?
    - What were the results?
    - Were there any recommendations?
    - Were they acted upon?
6. Has your branch incorporated stress management into its' campaigning and organising strategy?

## Appendix: further reading

**UNISON publications available from the UNISON Online Catalogue (<http://www.unison.org.uk/for-activists/help-and-advice/communicating/online-catalogue/>) unless stated.**

1. *Risk assessment: a guide for UNISON safety reps* (stock no. 1351)
2. *Making sickness absence policies work better for us* (stock no. 2594)
3. *Tackling bullying at work: UNISON guidelines* (stock no. 1281)
4. *It's not part of the job: UNISON guidelines on tackling violence at work* (stock no. 1346)
5. *Working alone: a UNISON guide* (stock no. 1750)
6. *Disability and health and safety* (stock no. 3068). Also for further information on the on all forms of discrimination and the Equality Act please go to the UNISON website at <https://secure.unison.org.uk/unisonf0d2bfd2bf1d3bbfa7ac24c0e625b2ff6c26750879/unison1/knowledge/discrimination/>
7. *UNISON safety in numbers toolkit* (stock no. 3251)
8. *UNISON's negotiator's guide to the working time regulations* (<https://secure.unison.org.uk/unisonf0d2bfd2bf1d3bbfa7ac24c0e625b2ff6c26750879/unison1/upload/sharepoint/Toweb/Working%20Time%20Regulations%20Negotiators%20Guidance.pdf> (not available from the UNISON Online Catalogue))

**TUC health and safety and stress pages**  
(<http://www.tuc.org.uk/workplace-issues/health-and-safety/>)

1. *Safety reps guide to the HSE stress management standards*
2. *Focus on health and safety; report on the TUC biennial survey of safety reps*

**HSE stress pages and publications (<http://www.hse.gov.uk/>)**

1. *Managing the causes of work-related stress: a step-by-step approach using the management standards*
2. *How to tackle work-related stress: a guide for employers on making the management standards work*
3. *Work related stress: research and statistics*
4. *Self-reported work-related illness and workplace injuries: results from the Labour Force Survey*
5. *Controlling the risks: web pages*

**Other publications:**

*Thompsons summary of the law on stress at work* (<http://www.thompsonstradeunionlaw.co.uk/information-and-resources/pdf/stress-at-work.pdf> )

*Sainsbury Centre for mental health: managing presenteeism: a discussion paper*  
([http://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/pdfs/managing\\_presenteeism.pdf](http://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/pdfs/managing_presenteeism.pdf) )



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