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# Feel Karma Stress Guide





Stress Management Society  
...from distress to de-stress

## ABOUT STRESS

The Health & Safety Executive defines stress as: "The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them". The organisation recognises that there is a convincing body of research showing a clear link between stress and ill health. Its research with Personnel Today Magazine recently showed that over 105 million days are lost to stress each year – costing UK employers £1.24 billion.

The research is based on responses from almost 700 senior HR practitioners and almost 2,000 employees.

Other findings are:

- 11% of absence is attributed to stress
- 52% say stress is increasing
- 60% claim stress is damaging staff retention
- 83% think stress is harming productivity

The HSE's official position on the problem is that work-related stress is a serious problem. Tackling it effectively can result in significant benefits for organisations. It states that there are things that can be done to prevent and control work-related stress. And indeed it considers that the law requires employers to take action on the matter.

Pressure itself is not bad. In fact, many thrive on it. But when those pressures exceed a person's ability to cope, then that is when the problems start. It follows, therefore, that we can tackle stress either by reducing pressures or by increasing coping resources – or a combination of the two.

That's where [The Stress Management Society](#) comes in, by giving people the techniques they need to cope with the stresses of working life.

Stress at work is one of the biggest single factors affecting productivity, efficiency and profitability – and in the current economic climate this is something that cannot be ignored. Find out more about [stress at work](#). Or book on one of our [free corporate events](#) to learn how to better deal with stress, absence and wellbeing at work.





## UNDERSTANDING STRESS

Much research has been conducted into stress over the last hundred years. Some of the theories behind it are now settled and accepted; others are still being researched and debated. During this time, there seems to have been something approaching open warfare between competing theories and definitions: Views have been passionately held and aggressively defended. What complicates this is that intuitively we all feel that we know what stress is, as it is something we have all experienced. A definition should therefore be obvious...except that it is not.

### Definitions

Hans Selye was one of the founding fathers of stress research. His view in 1956 was that "stress is not necessarily something bad – it all depends on how you take it. The stress of exhilarating, creative successful work is beneficial, while that of failure, humiliation or infection is detrimental." Selye believed that the biochemical effects of stress would be experienced, irrespective of whether the situation was positive or negative.

Since then, a great deal of further research has been conducted, and ideas have moved on. Stress is now viewed as a "bad thing", with a range of harmful biochemical and long-term effects. These effects have rarely been observed in positive situations.

The most commonly accepted definition of stress is that **stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that "demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilise."**

We also recognise that there is an intertwined instinctive stress response to unexpected events. The stress response inside us is therefore part instinct and part to do with the way we think.

### Fight or flight

Some of the early research on stress (conducted by Walter Cannon in 1932) established the existence of the well-known "fight-or-flight" response. His work showed that when an organism experiences a shock or perceives a threat, it quickly releases hormones that help it to survive. In humans, as in other animals, these hormones help us to run faster and fight harder. They increase heart rate and blood pressure, delivering more oxygen and blood sugar to power important muscles. They increase sweating in an effort to cool these muscles, and help them stay efficient. They divert blood away from the skin to the core of our bodies, reducing blood loss if we



are damaged. As well as this, these hormones focus our attention on the threat, to the exclusion of everything else. All of this significantly improves our ability to survive life-threatening events.

Life-threatening events are not the only ones to trigger this reaction. We experience it almost any time we come across something unexpected or something that frustrates our goals. When the threat is small, our response is small and we often do not notice it among the many other distractions of a stressful situation.

Unfortunately, this mobilisation of the body for survival also has negative consequences. In this state, we are excitable, anxious, jumpy and irritable. This actually reduces our ability to work effectively with other people. With trembling and a pounding heart, we can find it difficult to execute precise, controlled skills. The intensity of our focus on survival interferes with our ability to make fine judgments by drawing information from many sources.

We find ourselves more accident-prone and less able to make good decisions. There are very few situations in modern working life where this response is useful. Most situations benefit from a calm, rational, controlled and socially sensitive approach.

In the short term, we need to keep this fight-or-flight response under control to be effective in our jobs. In the long term we need to keep it under control to avoid problems of poor health and burnout.

## **What is stress?**

To really understand this, ask yourself: what causes stress?

We cannot specify what external conditions cause stress as the stress reaction is based on our interpretation of a stressful condition. There is not a specific cause of stress – only a person's reaction to a condition, situation or an event.

How we react to a stressful situation is based on our individual appraisal and interpretation; although some situations are considerably more stressful than others – such as going to the dentist, having surgery, moving job/school/house, exams, weddings, divorces etc.

We cannot avoid stress. Situations arise on a day to day basis which make physical mental and emotional demands on us. There may be decisions that need to be made, deadlines that need to be met, lessons to be learned. It doesn't matter whether we are at work or at play. Stress is the driving force that keeps us on our toes and ensures that we push to be the best we can be.



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However that is only valid up to a certain point. If we have too much stress and endless wear and tear, it can drive us into physical, mental and emotional exhaustion.

Having too little stress can also be a problem. If we are not exposed to the driving forces that push us and we are not stretched or committed, we can become bored, sluggish and lethargic. Therefore it is imperative to strike a balance between not enough stress and too much stress.

As individuals, we must take stock of all aspects of our life and situations. We must change our attitudes and behaviours – it is not so much the things which stress us that cause the problems, but rather the way in which we react to them. If treated early, the prospects are good. If left, there is a risk that 'burnout' may become a permanent state of affairs.





## How do we feel when we become stressed?

When a stressful situation is interpreted as dangerous or threatening, people experience feelings of tension, apprehension and worry. They also undergo a range of physiological and behavioural changes. These feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry may also be accompanied with behavioural and physiological changes such as trembling; palpitations; dizziness; tremors and so on. These are also very often, the symptoms of anxiety. Therefore anxiety is something that is felt.

We encounter sources of stress every day of our lives and at every stage of human development.

Think about the kind of stresses we go through:

At birth

As a toddler

At school

As a teenager

At work

At home

At middle age

At retirement/old age

Change causes stress – environmental and technological in particular – as well as life events. The key factor that causes stress is **significant change that requires adaptation**. If only we could learn to adapt more easily...

There can be many kinds of internal conflicts that cause stress. The most common one is conflict between some emotion or desire and prohibitive internal voice eg, 'I want to' versus 'I mustn't' or between a reluctance to do something and an internalised sense of duty – an 'I don't want to' versus 'I should'.

## What happens in our bodies when we get stressed?

### **Fight/flight mode – stress**

Heart rate increases

Mouth dries up

Forehead tenses

Breathing becomes shallow and fast

Eyes strain

Jaws and teeth are clenched

Distresses facial complexion

Anger/hostility

Perspiration increases



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Blood vessels close  
Skin tightens  
Increased white blood cells  
Blood sugar increases  
Blood pressure increases  
Stomach butterflies/digestive system suspended  
Bladder relaxes  
If you stay in this state for a prolonged period it will lead to exhaustion and then depression.

### **Rest and digest – relaxed**

Heart rates decreases  
Breathing deepens and slows  
Blood vessels return to normal  
Salivation returns to normal  
Facial muscles relax  
Pupils return to normal  
Production of white blood cells inhibited  
Muscles relax  
Blood pressure reduces  
Blood sugar reduces  
Sweat glands close  
Digestion returns to normal  
Bladder contracts  
Restful and calm feelings

Chronic stress can lead to BACK PROBLEMS, HEART PROBLEMS, MIGRAINE, ASTHMA, DIGESTIVE PROBLEMS, SKIN CONDITIONS AND ALLERGIES.

**Remember it is physically impossible to be ANXIOUS and RELAXED at the same time.**

Stress and anxiety both require energy. And once the energy is used up, the person is de-pressed and has no energy left to feed the unresolved anxieties. Another way of looking at it is, the person de-pressed themselves to escape dealing with reality.





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## **STRESS AT WORK**

Workplace stress is a serious issue for UK employers. It is an issue that has no respect for position or seniority – it is just as likely to affect a new recruit in the post room as the chief executive.

In fact, it already does: it is now the single biggest cause of sickness absence in the UK and costs UK industry £3.7 billion each year. In the UK over 13 million working days are lost every year because of stress. Stress is believed to trigger 70% of visits to doctors, and 85% of serious illnesses (UK HSE stress statistics).

It actually makes good sense for employers to tackle stress at work. Stressed 'companies' have lower productivity and increased management pressures. Workplace stress affects how well staff perform including memory, concentration and the ability to learn.

When you think that one in five people at work report it as a problem, you can see how much companies have to gain by dealing with the issue; they could cut significant amounts of staff sickness, absence and management time and improve morale. In employer terms, that's like winning the National Lottery!

On the other hand, companies are also risking a lot by not dealing with stress at work. Disgruntled employees can – and do – take them to court. Businesses in this situation could face significant damages, bad publicity and loss of reputation.

### **Stress and professions**

In the UK, the Health & Safety Executive publishes data on the most stressful professions. Top of the table are nursing and teaching, with 2% of workers at any one time suffering from serious work-related stress, depression and anxiety. Next come care workers, managers and professionals. Here 1% suffer from serious work-related stress at any one time. The HSE data reveals that work-related stress affects men and women equally. However there is a period at work when it becomes a particular problem – from the age of 45 to retirement.



## What the law says

Legislation covering stress at work is surprisingly piecemeal. There's no one piece of law that covers it. Instead, protection comes from a wide range of regulations:

- The **Health & Safety at Work Act 1974** requires employers to provide a workplace that is safe and healthy.
- The **Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999** require employers to be more active about identifying risks through risk assessment of health and safety issues, including stress and make sure there are adequate controls in place to deal with the issue.
- **The Working Time Regulations 1998** limit the working week to 48 hours. However many companies may ask employees to waive their right to be governed by this piece of legislation, which is legal.
- **The Health & Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992** state that employers should risk assess the use of display screen equipment in their companies.

## New guidelines from the Health & Safety Executive

However in the last couple of years there has been a major step forward for companies and employees wanting a formal structure to tackle stress in the workplace. The Health & Safety Executive has issued new guidelines on the problem to help employers meet their legal obligations.

Its Management Standards set out a structure showing how to risk-assess a company for stress, and how to tackle any problems identified as needing action.

The Standards look at several areas: the demands made on employees; the level of control employees have over their work; the support employees receive from managers and colleagues; the clarity of an employee's role within the organisation; the nature of relationships at work; and the way that change is managed.

The Standards are designed to build a structure that lets employers take care of stress at work. They let you easily identify current performance, judge how this differs from benchmark standards, and develop solutions to close the gap.

However as most employers and employees know, stress does not start and stop at the office door. It is therefore prudent to train managers in spotting the signs of stress, and helping them learn to be sympathetic to people when home problems 'leak' into the work environment.



Bearing in mind the Health & Safety Executive guidelines, the Stress Management Society advises companies in the following way:

1. **Conduct a stress audit** - Use existing data to judge your current position, such as exit interviews and sickness, absence and staff turnover records. Start surveying staff as to their attitude and experience of stress at work, e.g. through the HSE survey, measuring performance against the six Management Standards (see [www.hse.gov.uk/stress](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress)). Or call in a consultant to coordinate a company-wide stress audit.
2. **Write a stress policy** - Now you know your issues, tackle them through a comprehensive stress policy. Write this yourself, or ask your consultant to do it. The policy should cover stress and mental health policies and must comply with HSE guidelines.
3. **Train staff** - Company-wide training will be helpful to all. It gives employees the stress-management techniques they need in their day-to-day jobs. And it helps managers understand the company's new stress policy, not only recognising stress symptoms in colleagues, but knowing how to react appropriately.
4. **Get some support** - Use stress-management products to support your company stress policy. Consider a stress monitor machine for communal staff areas, stress balls printed with a corporate message, or 'mood cards' with a stress monitor the size of a business card that can be used time and time again. For these and other ideas, see [www.feelkarma.com](http://www.feelkarma.com)

### **So what are you doing about it?**

If you consider yourself stressed at work, it is important to do something. It is not worth risking your health just because of your job. After all, no-one at the end of their life ever said "I wish I'd worked harder".

Also if you work with other people, learn to recognise the symptoms of stress in others and if necessary refer the problem upwards to someone who can deal with it. Not only is it the ethical thing to do, to help a colleague. But it will also benefit you too, improving your working environment.

### **How to spot stress at work**

These are some traditional causes of stress at work:

- unreasonable demands in the job
- overwork
- office politics
- feeling out of control of your destiny
- a feeling of being under-appreciated
- uncertainty about job security
- difficulty with communication
- difficulty with resolving problems
- bullying or harassment



Certain factors may indicate a potential problem.

- An increase in sick leave
- More accidents at work
- Arguments and disputes between people
- A tendency to work late and not take breaks
- A loss of sense of humour, replaced by irritability
- A tendency to suffer from headaches, nausea, aches and pains, tiredness and poor sleeping patterns
- A decrease in work standards
- Indecisiveness and poor judgement
- A problem with drinking or drug taking

You can take a fuller stress test at the Stress Management Society website – go to [www.stress.org.uk](http://www.stress.org.uk) and click 'take the test' on the 'About Stress' page.

If stress is a factor, identify the cause of the stress and – if it is work related – do everything you can to solve it. That might mean dealing with the thing causing the stress, or moving yourself away from the stressor.

### **Advice for managers**

If you are trying to help someone who you think is suffering from stress, remember that a person in this position is in full 'fight or flight'. They will be unable to deal with the problem on their own. In fact, they may strenuously deny they have a problem at all and be very sceptical about offers of help. And if you are the person's manager, you may be causing the stress yourself.

Therefore involve your staff in discussions about stress and ask for openness with you about problems. You can gauge a lot in a relaxed environment by asking a simple question – "What are the three 'best' and three 'worst' aspects of your job?" But tread carefully. Talk to your HR department about the best way of approaching the problem. Or talk to a professional organisation such as the Stress Management Society for help and advice.

### **ABOUT OUR STRESS MANAGEMENT TRAINING**

We provide a workshop for anyone interested in being freed from the stress trap. It is especially aimed at people working in a high-pressure environment. However its techniques can benefit people from any level, background or industry.

It includes training in '[desk yoga](#)' and '[desk massage](#)', which can be done discreetly, even in an open plan office. Such techniques relax stressed muscles and rebalance body and mind. They also focus on proper breathing, an essential tool in de-stressing.



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Lastly the workshop includes training on how to relax and become more centred through [creative visualisation](#). Even a few minutes in this state of deep relaxation is equivalent to several hours sleep. Delegates are taught to achieve a state of self-hypnosis to take advantage of these benefits. Once learned they can be applied in any type of work environment, or even on the bus going to work!





## A TEN-STEP GUIDE TO COPING WITH STRESS

*1) Avoid nicotine, alcohol, caffeine and refined sugar products.*

They are all stimulants, so therefore they cannot calm you down. If you're stressed, steer clear of them and keep yourself well-hydrated by drinking water instead. The [quality of the water](#) you drink can also have an impact on your wellbeing.

*2) Work off stress with physical activity.*

Pressure or anger releases adrenaline in the body. Exercise helps to reduce it, and produces 'good mood' substances in the brain. So go for a brisk walk around the block when you feel tense, and try some regular exercise after work.

*3) Relax with a stress reduction technique every day.*

Try self-hypnosis – it's very easy and can even be done at your desk. We can recommend courses in [self-hypnosis](#) and we have an extensive range of [relaxation CDs](#) that can teach you the secrets of this technique. Or think up a self-affirming mantra to repeat to yourself (eg 'I deserve calm in my life', or 'I have a choice in every situation'). Repeat it to yourself whenever you feel tense.

*4) Get enough sleep.*

Sleep is essential for the body to function properly. Sleeping pills are not necessary if you change your life-style. If you've habitually skimmed on sleep, you probably won't even remember how it feels to wake up fully rested. Give it a go for a week, and see if there's a difference in how you perform during the day. If you are struggling try some [sleep aids](#) that will ensure a restful night's sleep.

*5) If you're ill, rest.*

Don't just carry on regardless. Working will tire the body and prolong the illness. So recognise that you have limits and don't carry on as if you were firing on all cylinders.

*6) Agree with somebody; once in a while!*

Life shouldn't be a constant battleground. So even if you disagree with someone, avoid conflict by just agreeing or keeping quiet. After all, they have a right to their opinion, just as you do.



*7) Learn to accept what you cannot change.*

A well known prayer asks for the serenity "to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference". This philosophy will help you avoid unhappiness, cynicism and bitterness.

*8) Listen to your body.*

When you are tired, hungry or thirsty, do something about it. Also recognise stress and anger in your day and counter it immediately with a brisk walk, ten minutes' in deep relaxation or whatever works for you. Order a batch of our ['stress squares'](#) to put around the house or office so you can test your stress levels whenever you like.

*9) Learn how to say 'no'.*

Simple, but effective. Where a 'no' is the appropriate response, say it without guilt.

*10) Manage your time.*

Take one thing at a time. Don't overdo things. Create time buffers to deal with unexpected emergencies. And, recognise that your day to day problems and responsibilities are the things that cause stress in your life. Tackle them with a system that works for you. We have our subliminal messaging CD that can help improve your [time management skills](#).

Stress often results from a general difficulty in coping with day-to-day problems and responsibilities. A useful strategy for dealing with a sense of being overwhelmed by all the things that need attention is **prioritising** and **diarising**:

Make a list of all the things that you need to do; list them in order of genuine importance; noting what you need to do personally and what can be delegated to others; and noting what needs to be done immediately, in the next week or next month etc.

What starts out as an overwhelming and unmanageable list which was the source of the stress and anxiety, is transformed into a more realistic and manageable set of tasks, spread out over a more achievable time frame, with some items removed from the list altogether, either through delegation or the realisation that they are, after all, unnecessary or unimportant.



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## **ABOUT THE STRESS MANAGEMENT SOCIETY**

[The Stress Management Society](http://www.stress.org.uk) is an organisation dedicated to helping people tackle stress at work and at home.

Our team of health and professional consultants offers the highest quality consultancy, staff training, event organisation and stress management products. All our services are delivered in line with the Health and Safety Executive's Stress Management Standards.

We work with individuals and companies ranging from sole traders to those listed on the FTSE 100. We work both in the public and private sector. We offer everything from simple advice to company-wide stress audits.

If you need help tackling stress, please get in touch.

**For more info or to book a workshop or a coaching session see [www.stress.org.uk](http://www.stress.org.uk), call 0844 357 8629 or email [info@stress.org.uk](mailto:info@stress.org.uk).**

**If you are interested in our range of stress management/wellbeing products, go to [www.feelkarma.com](http://www.feelkarma.com).**

**If you want to promote your company or message with stress management products branded with your company name or colours, go to [www.stressmoodcards.com](http://www.stressmoodcards.com).**

