

To tackle workplace stress, we need more than warm words

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Published date

08 Nov 2017



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The Health and Safety Executive has published a [new report](#) on levels of ill-health caused by workplace health and it shows that, for the second year running, the number of cases reported has crept up.

There are now 526,000 people who are suffering from work-related stress, depression or anxiety and almost half of them (236,000) are new cases.

The health problems that stress can cause are often life-changing. Some people are unable to work again, and others find their confidence is shattered for years. It can also have a massive effect on family life and relationships. The statistics also show that during any one year, each person who has a stress-related illness is, on average, likely to be off sick for over a month because of it.

The HSE report shows that women are 61 per cent more likely to suffer from workplace stress than men. This is probably because they're more likely to work in jobs that deal with the public. They are also found in sectors that have been among the hardest hit by cuts, pay freezes and reorganisations. The sectors with the highest stress rates include nursing, teaching and welfare work. All of those are over 80 per cent female.

Yet stress is avoidable. According to the HSE the main cause of work-related stress is being asked to do too much, both in terms of workload or pressure/responsibility, although other factors are a lack of management support and threats of violence and bullying. These can all be reduced but instead management are only too often willing to allow their employees to be made seriously ill rather than treat them like human beings.

For ten years there has been [clear guidance](#) from the HSE on what employers must do to tackle stress-related illness by removing the causes. These are the stress management standards and emphasise the importance of risk assessment and risk management. But instead of using them, most employers have done nothing or, at most, focused on supporting workers after they are made ill.

Now however the HSE have begun to try to get things to change. They have launched a [campaign](#) that is aimed at making it clear to employers that they have a responsibility to deal with stress by tackling the causes of it. They have also worked with the TUC to produce [joint guidance](#) for union health and safety representatives about how they can try to get their employer to tackle stress, and are working with unions in a number of sectors to promote the use of the stress management standards.

This is a very welcome step forward and unions are eager to work with the HSE, but simply giving guidance to employers is not going to be enough. Employers will continue to make their workers ill if they think they can get away with it because it is cheaper to deal with the sickness absence than tackle the real problems of under-staffing, bad management, bullying and harassment.

This will continue until employers are forced to act. That means that those that continue to damage their workforce should face prosecution.

There is no reason at all why the HSE or local authorities should not be taking enforcement action now against employers who do not provide a safe workplace by dealing with stress. Also, as the HSE statistics show, there is an obvious need for simple, clear regulations

requiring employers to conduct risk assessments for stress and to take action to remove or manage it, in the same way as they should for other risks such as chemicals.