

## **Signed off Work with Stress in the UK**

Stress remains one of the top work-related factors that affect the health of adults in the UK. According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), stress, depression or anxiety accounted for half of workplace caused illness cases in 2020/21. An estimated number of 822,000 employees were affected.

### **Employer's responsibility towards staff off work with stress**

Before you worry about your employee handing in a sick note for stress, think of what can cause this.

They might experience difficulties in their personal life. Or they can go through work-related strain that negatively impacts their mental health. In this case, it falls within your responsibility to assess the risks and improve their work environment.

Employers have a duty of care towards the wellbeing of their staff. But many people struggle to discuss work-related stress and anxiety. Whether they fear losing their job or being considered poor performers, we've seen employees reluctant to approach their managers with such issues.

To prevent mental health difficulties from escalating, ask these questions:

- How can you better help your employees in dealing with workplace challenges and resulting strains?
- How can you better support their recovery when they have been signed off with stress?

Avoid the temptation to think such mental health issues will not affect your workforce. Data identifies almost 18 million workdays lost to stress, anxiety, or depression in the year previous to the pandemic. This makes double the number of workdays lost to musculoskeletal disorders in the same period.

Give your employees the option to seek help when they need it, through an employee assistance programme (EAP). Such programmes counsel workers on any mental health difficulties they might experience, whether personal or work related.

Before you decide to refer your staff, approach them with caution to discuss. You cannot force them to take this course of action.

If your organisation doesn't already have an employee wellbeing programme, we can help. Our EAP call centre offers free 24/7 counselling, critical incident advice and telephone support.

### **After an employee gets signed off work with anxiety or stress**

When dealing with a doctor's note for stress and anxiety, you need to understand and assess the situation well.

If your staff member is going through personal difficulties, follow the advice we've given above. Show them you care about their wellbeing and want to support them.

If work-related aspects affect their mental health, don't wait for the situation to escalate. We recommend following this three-step approach:

1. Treat the issue like a sickness absence. By downgrading the problem, you risk upsetting the individual and making the situation worse.
2. If the employee experiences damaging levels of stress at work, assess what is causing this. Identify which factors and aspects need improving, agree on a plan and act on it.
3. If the employee becomes so stressed they feel they can no longer be part of the company, they can pursue constructive dismissal.

In such a case, it's in your interest to pinpoint contributing factors and resolve them.

Ideally, you should aim to prevent getting to the third stage of this process. The main goal of understanding work-related stress is to support and retain staff.

Start by inviting them to a meeting either before they take time off work, or after. Ask them how you can help accommodate them moving forward.

Don't hold such a meeting only to tick a box. Turn this into a real opportunity to improve the work environment, your systems, and ways of working. It will potentially benefit everybody on the long run.

### **Causes and symptoms of workplace stress**

More often than not, we've seen staff take stress sick leave in the UK when they struggle with:

- An excessive workload
- Poor relationships with colleagues
- Poor relationships with managers
- The working environment—a toxic company culture

It is never too late to address such issues, even if the effort to improve feels overwhelming. At the end of the day, a happy, healthy workforce will engage better, increasing productivity and contributing towards business growth.

While employers can't act as trained therapists, unless qualified to do so, they can recognise signs of stress, such as:

- Insomnia
- Fatigue
- Apathy
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Difficulty concentrating
- Low mood
- Excessive intake of caffeine or alcohol
- Low productivity
- Regular absences or lateness
- High sickness rate
- Cynicism and defensiveness

- Headaches
- Backaches
- Indigestion
- Weight loss or gain
- Shortness of breath
- Regular or lingering cold

You can approach and discuss these symptoms in a return to work interview. Encourage the individual to open up about any work-related aspects that might be causing them. If these symptoms have persisted for a while, advise them to seek support for stress related mental health issues. The sooner they receive the help they need, the better their prospects of recovery.

### **Employee rights in work-related stress and anxiety**

When signed off work with stress in the UK, employees keep the same entitlement to sick pay. This means treating mental health difficulties the same way you would any physical illness.

Also, when requesting time off work for anxiety or stress in the UK, the employee might ask for compensation. UK law allows them to claim for personal injury due to work-related stress in case it causes other health issues.

If the employee can prove their stress resulted from harassment or discrimination, they might even pursue a tribunal claim. For them to pursue a claim, they'll want to receive a diagnosis from a medical professional.

In a case of long periods of absence, you may request a formal meeting to discuss their return to work. If the employee refuses to meet, or misses multiple appointments, you can begin to consider a capability dismissal.

Suffering with stress doesn't count as a disability in the UK. However, this very common mental health issue can trigger conditions considered a disability. Every employer should take all the necessary steps to avoid such an outcome.

The way you treat your staff who experience high levels of stress will make all the difference. Supporting them in dealing with their difficulties will give them the best incentive to keep working for you.

### **Get advice on how to manage stress sick leave in the UK**

Work-related stress and illness accounts for a significant number of working days lost in the UK. If your employees are struggling with mental health difficulties, we can help.

Talk to us about our employee assistance programme and any other HR related issues resulting from employees dealing with stress.

Call our advice line today, on **0844 561 8133** and quote **88132**.