

A GUIDE TO PREVENTING AND REDUCING STRESS AT WORK

Guidance for line
managers



1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 150,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.



1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

Introduction to the line manager support materials

Managers play a vital role in determining the health, wellbeing and engagement of their team. They also play an essential part in managing particular people management issues that arise in their team, such as bereavement, conflict, sickness absence and mental health problems, which can have a negative impact on employee health, wellbeing and engagement if not well managed.

CIPD research identified five key behavioural areas that are important for line managers to support the health, wellbeing and engagement of those who work for them:



Being open, fair and consistent



Handling conflict and people management issues



Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance



Building and sustaining relationships



Supporting development

A line manager's behaviour and the culture they create in their team is the biggest influence on an employee's work experience. Capability in these five behavioural areas, underpinned by an attitude of care, respect, compassion, wisdom and kindness, is vital for line managers to manage the health, wellbeing and engagement of their team. Such capability will also provide the foundation for line managers to manage particular people management issues and will enable managers to take a positive approach, recognise employee needs in these situations and manage them in ways that are sensitive, supportive and inclusive.

The CIPD has created a range of support materials to help you adopt a management approach that supports good health, wellbeing and engagement in your team by helping you explore and develop your management capability. Designed for anyone who manages people, the guidance and exercises are quick and easy to use. They can help you save time and get better results by managing people well – all of which is good for your own wellbeing as well as that of your team.

To build on these resources, the CIPD has also created a series of guides focusing on specific areas of people management that aim to support managers in dealing with particular people management issues. Each of these guides provides practical information and advice relevant to that particular people management issue, as well as linking it to the approach covered in the support materials. The intention is that managers use the five key behavioural areas as the basis for managing all the issues, and draw on specific relevant behaviours from within the framework to help with the particular issue in question. Look out for the icons to understand which of the behaviours is particularly relevant to the issues being discussed. You can then refer back to the exercises to develop these behaviours further.



1 Introduction

When your team is happy, healthy and engaged in their work, they're more likely to meet their goals and help you to meet yours. More good days for your team lead to more good days for you, as well as a healthier, happier work environment.

On the other hand, when people are stressed or burned out, their performance and relationships with others will suffer.

So, what can you do to minimise some of the key triggers for workplace stress that could be holding you and your team back?

CIPD research shows that by far the most common cause of stress at work is heavy workloads, followed by the second most common cause – management style. Looking at the other sources of workplace stress, such as organisational change, pressure to meet targets, lack of clarity about expectations and lack of support from managers, it's clear to see the important role you can play in reducing causes of stress. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the sudden move to remote working for many, job insecurity for some and changed work arrangements for almost everyone, has created additional stress factors, which you also have a key role in helping people manage.

All the line manager behaviours identified by the CIPD research mentioned above will help you prevent and reduce stress in your team. The first four behavioural areas are particularly important in this context:



Building and sustaining relationships will be vital for managing team wellbeing, including showing empathy, concern and consideration for all employees, taking an interest in them as individuals, interacting with them in a friendly way and offering opportunities for people to speak to you one-to-one. This will both help prevent stress and also enable you to spot the signs when someone is struggling, encourage them to speak to you about it and find ways of supporting them. [Exercise 5](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours.



Being open, fair and consistent will help you bring respect and openness, consistency and fairness to managing the team, while also being positive and appreciative. This will support a positive culture and help people thrive, preventing stress and managing challenges that arise. [Exercise 1](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours. Part of this behavioural area is also about being able to remain calm yourself when under pressure, which is vital to ensure that you don't pass stress on to your team. [Exercise 2](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours.



Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance will help you ensure that your team knows what is expected of them and how they are doing. It will also mean that you give advice when necessary, are decisive when needed and take responsibility for solving problems. [Exercise 4](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours.



Handling conflict and people management issues will prevent these potentially harmful situations from causing stress-related problems in your team. [Exercise 3](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours.



1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

Carving out time to consider the seven simple steps outlined in this guide will help you and your team to thrive. In the long run it will save you time by preventing issues from arising or dealing with those that do arise early and effectively.

2 Get to know your team better

- Give every member of your team a good induction when they start in a new role – it's a great way to get to know them and will help them settle in more quickly.
- If you inherit an existing team, avoid prioritising your own agenda too soon. Get to know the interpersonal dynamics, personalities and ways of working in the team before establishing your agenda.
- Have regular one-to-ones and put health and wellbeing on the agenda for every team meeting – it's an opportunity to discuss pressures and workloads, and work together to plan work effectively.
- Get to know what really matters to your team, remembering that everyone's different:
 - What motivates them?
 - What are their personal triggers for stress?
 - Do they feel resilient and able to manage their emotional needs?
 - Do they feel secure and supported in their job, and a sense of belonging and inclusion in the team?
 - Are they happy with their work-life balance?
 - Would they feel comfortable raising any ongoing health concerns or personal issues with you?
- Show genuine care, compassion and kindness to team members and express interest in and concern for them as part of your management style.
- Make yourself personally available to talk; encourage your team to open up to you by showing empathy and really listening to people's concerns. This is even more important when many employees are homeworking due to COVID-19. See our [webinar](#) on how to support remote employees effectively, and implement inclusive and flexible working policies going forward.
- Read our [top tips](#) for having a conversation about stress.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Building and sustaining relationships**. Look at [Exercise 5](#) for advice on how to develop this area.

3 Lead by example to promote healthy working habits

- Take care of your own wellbeing and do so visibly to show your team that it's okay for them to do the same.
- Create time in your working day for exercise or other activities that can help reduce stress and burnout.



- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

- Take time out to rest and recharge after busy periods – take regular lunch breaks and use your full annual leave entitlement.
- Take time off when you're unwell; don't struggle in to work or log on remotely. 'Presenteeism' (working when ill) is bad for health and bad for business. [See step 6](#) for more advice on avoiding 'presenteeism'.
- Avoid working excessive hours, emailing employees outside working hours or checking in with work when you're on holiday. If you need to do so, make it clear that you don't expect a reply immediately. Consider using an email signature such as the following to advocate your approach to flexible working: *'I work flexibly at the CIPD. If I'm sending this email outside of regular hours, it's because it suits my work pattern just now and, importantly, I don't expect you to read, respond or action it outside of your regular hours.'*
- Take advantage of any flexible working opportunities your employer offers that might help you achieve a better work-life balance.
- Reflect on your own stress levels: what warning signs do you show when you are struggling to keep calm? How can you address any sources of stress in your own work and life?
- Bring self-compassion to yourself, including awareness, self-kindness and a sense of how we all find some things difficult. This will not only help you take care of your own wellbeing, but also enable you to bring greater compassion to your team, which can, in turn, create a culture of compassion and mutual support across the team.



This relates closely to being able to remain calm yourself when under pressure, which is part of the behaviour area **Being open, fair and consistent**. [Exercise 2](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours.

4 Review workloads, duties and responsibilities

- Give everyone in your team all the information, training and development they need to perform their job to a good standard and understand how they contribute to wider organisational goals.
- Set clear and realistic deadlines and expectations.
- Watch out for people working excessive hours with no breaks – it could mean there's too much work to do, or your team might need support and development to work more effectively.
- Make sure everyone's roles and responsibilities are well matched with their skills, experience and career aspirations.
- Wherever possible, give your team a say over what they do and how they do it.
- Make time for people and be ready to give advice and guidance when it is appropriate, but also aim to empower your team to find their own solutions.
- Support people with timely, constructive and clear feedback on their work and progress.
- Give people who work alone opportunities to form relationships with others and give those who work in busy teams the opportunity to work in a quieter environment from time to time.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance**. [Exercise 4](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours.



The aspect of giving people the development they need also relates closely to the behaviour area **Supporting development**. [Exercise 6](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours.

5 Reflect on your own management style

- Does your team know where they stand with you? If you are fair, open and consistent, your team is more likely to cope well under pressure than if you are unpredictable or indecisive.
- How much positive and constructive feedback do you give your team?
- Are you open and approachable, and comfortable having sensitive conversations with people?
- How do you handle conflicts or cases of bullying or harassment? Do you sit on things and let them fester, or do you act decisively and rationally? [See step 6](#) for more advice on how to improve in this area.
- Do you treat people as individuals and flex your management style to suit the needs of each team member?
- Do you give members of your team a good balance of autonomy and support?
- Do you treat everyone in the team (and beyond) with respect and remain open to other perspectives?
- Are you careful to treat people with impartiality and kindness and to maintain your own integrity?
- How do you communicate change and support your team through it? Make use of our [top tips on communicating with employees](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Being open, fair and consistent**. [Exercise 1](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours.

To gain insight into your management capability in this and all five of the behavioural areas, you can complete the [quiz](#) and then use the [step-by-step guidance](#) that are part of the CIPD support materials. These will help you reflect and get feedback, thereby enabling you to identify your strengths and areas to develop and plan the action you will take to enhance your management approach.



1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

6 Identify potential conflict and people issues and handle them early

- Make sure you handle conflicts as early as possible. As soon as you identify any potential conflict, make sure you address the situation; don't let conflict fester – deal with squabbles before they turn into arguments.
- When addressing conflict, make sure you act impartially, kindly and rationally to resolve the issue.
- If cases of bullying, harassment, abuse or other severe issues arise in your team, ensure that you provide appropriate support and address the issues decisively.
- Follow up on conflicts after initial resolution to make sure that they are truly resolved and have not continued to smoulder or have not reignited.
- Seek support for yourself and your team where necessary – for example, from HR, occupational health or other organisational resources.
- Consult the CIPD guidance for line managers on [dealing with conflict at work](#) for more detail on this.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Handling conflict and people management issues**. [Exercise 3](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours.

7 Discourage 'presenteeism' in your team

- If someone in your team is under the weather, make sure they don't work, they recover, and they resume working only once they're fit and healthy.
- Make clear that you don't expect anyone to work when ill. Recovering means switching off and ignoring emails altogether.
- Only contact the person to ask how they are; don't enquire about work.
- Look out for signs that someone in your team might be unwell or struggling to perform in their role due to ill health. These signs might be obvious (like the flu) or less visible (like ongoing stress and anxiety).
- Have regular catch-ups with your team where you ask after their health and wellbeing as a matter of course. It's easier to spot the signs of ill health if you know people on an individual level.
- Be prepared to have a sensitive, supportive conversation with a team member if you feel they shouldn't be at work – it's better for their (and their colleagues') health if they go home and get better.
- Some people feel under pressure to not take their annual leave, or to work while they're on holiday. This is counterproductive as people need to have a break from work. As a manager, you're an important role model, so make sure you take your leave and resist checking in with your team while you're on holiday. Your team will in turn be more likely to do the same.



1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

- Check workloads and schedules in advance to ensure your team has adequate time to take holiday and that they won't feel obligated to work over busy periods.
- Learn how to [manage annual leave](#) and ensure your staff take the time off they need.
- If presenteeism persists despite your best efforts, you might need to turn to your HR department for help.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Building and sustaining relationships**. [Exercise 5](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours. It also relates closely to the behaviour area **Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance**. [Exercise 4](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours.

8 Manage the mental health of your team while remote working

- An increasing number of people are now working from home, so pay particular attention to the support they need to stay connected. See our [guide to mental health support](#) for employees during COVID-19 and our line manager guide on [managing and supporting remote workers](#).
- Make time for social conversations. This increases rapport, reduces feelings of isolation and eases communication between people working from home. You could set up a daily virtual huddle – essential for keeping connected as a team and checking in on each other's wellbeing.
- People can be more sensitive if they're feeling isolated or anxious, so tailor your feedback and communications. Communicate regularly and make sure you give constructive and positive feedback to help them feel engaged and valued.
- Listen closely and read between the lines. Working remotely means you won't always be able to gauge body language or tone to sense what people are thinking or feeling. Home in on what's not being said and ask questions to clarify your interpretation. Set up one-to-ones using videoconferencing so you can see someone's face and pick up on facial cues.
- Support a healthy work-life balance. Help your team avoid burnout and overworking by encouraging regular breaks and clear start and finish times for the working day. Encourage self-care and healthy habits, such as getting exercise, sleep and fresh air (if possible), and practising relaxation techniques like yoga and mindfulness.
- Remind your team of their existing health and wellbeing benefits (such as employee assistance programmes, counselling or occupational health), and how to access them when working remotely.
- Trust your team to get on with their work but provide them with support and supervision. Set clear expectations, focusing on results rather than monitoring hours worked. Without trust, working relationships can deteriorate and wellbeing will suffer.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Building and sustaining relationships**. [Exercise 5](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours. It also relates closely to the behaviour area **Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance**. [Exercise 4](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours.



9 Useful resources

- The Health and Safety Executive provides a range of materials about [work-related stress](#) at work. In particular, their Talking Toolkit is designed to help line managers have conversations with employees to prevent stress.
- The CIPD provides a [factsheet](#) about stress in the workplace.
- Mind offers guidance on how to be [mentally healthy at work](#), including managing stress at work.

Consider using the full range of support materials if you haven't already done so

If reading this guide has highlighted areas of people management capability that you would like to develop, why not use the full range of support materials to help you adopt a management approach that supports good health, wellbeing and engagement in your team?

You can get insight into your management capability across all five behavioural areas by completing the [quiz](#) and then use the [step-by-step guidance](#) to help you get feedback, identify strengths and areas to develop, and plan the action you will take. There is also an [action plan sheet](#), which can be used to note down and track your actions; a [quiz](#) to help you identify potential barriers and develop strategies to overcome them; and a [series of exercises](#) to provide ideas and inspiration relevant to each of the behavioural areas, some of which have already been highlighted above.





1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

10 Appendix

Top tips for having a conversation about stress

Prior to the conversation

Be aware:

- The cause may be highly personal and sensitive.
- The cause may not be concerned with the business or working environment.
- The conversation may lead to a need for follow-up support – this shouldn't stop you having the conversation, but you need to be prepared for this to be an issue which requires ongoing management.
- The problem may be easily solved by early and informal help from the line manager and organisation, for example, allowing the individual time off to solve the problem themselves.

Setting up the conversation

- Consider how urgent the need is to see them and respond accordingly – that is, have you observed a dramatic emotional outburst or more subtle symptoms over time?
- Approach the individual when they are on their own.
- Take an informal approach as they may not have admitted to themselves that there is a problem – *'I'd like to have a chat about how things are going...'* but, be clear that it's not just a *'social chat at the coffee machine'*.
- Agree on a mutually convenient time to have the discussion.
- Set aside around half an hour and arrange cover for them if necessary.
- Arrange a private space where there will be no interruptions. If you're in the workplace, sit next to each other or around a coffee table, rather than talking across your desk.

Establishing purpose of the conversation

Be clear and explicit about the purpose of the conversation from the outset:

- You want to help.
- Emphasise that it is not a disciplinary or formal performance review.
- Explain that as their manager you have identified some changes in behaviour that are concerning you and suggest they may be finding it difficult to cope.
- Avoid the temptation to launch into behavioural examples straight away, even if they ask for them – assure them that you will come on to these, but you want to set out the purpose of the conversation first.
- Explain that you want to understand any stress-related issues or problems and what the causes might be.
- Be clear that it is in their benefit to have an open and honest discussion. The main objective is to begin to identify a suitable way forward to help and support them if necessary.
- Try to strike a balance between beginning a formal process and taking a sensitive approach.
- Reiterate that you want to help.

Confidentiality

- Establish confidentiality before you get into any discussion and discuss any exceptions that might apply.
- Tell the individual that you will inform them of anything you feel you need to disclose and why.
- Reinforce that the main reason for the conversation is to offer support and help.
- Explain that you will be up front about what is agreed and as far as possible you will agree the way forward together.



1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

Opening questions

- Ask an open question to begin with, for example: *'How do you feel things are going at the moment?'*
- Try to create an open and relaxed environment.
- If relevant, explore whether there are any obvious reasons for recent behaviour, for example a difficult situation at work, a poor appraisal.

If they say nothing or don't want to talk about it

- Make a concerted effort to encourage them to open up, but don't push too hard – use your judgement.
- Only if this fails, ask if they would like to talk to anyone else instead (for example, a manager one level up) or refer on to an occupational health specialist if there is clearly a problem – ensure reasons for referral are clear.
- Explain that whatever is going on needs to be addressed as it's affecting their behaviour and/or work.
- Explain that you will need to be kept informed of what support the individual takes up and the outcome of this.

If they think everything is going fine

- Start to feed back the specific behaviours you have seen and ask for their interpretation – without being confrontational.
- Be open to the fact that it may have been a short-term issue and there's actually no need for intervention – but agree to monitor the situation.

If they get angry or emotional

- Don't be afraid to let them get it out of their system.
- Explain that you're here to help, whenever they're ready to talk – you may need to schedule another time to talk if they're not ready now, but don't use this option too readily.
- Ask them what they would like to do from here.
- Offer understanding and sympathy.
- LISTEN, but take control of the situation.
- Remember you can cope with their reaction and focus on finding the best way forward.

Feed back your observations

- Start to feed back what you have seen behaviourally and why it is concerning you.
- Refer to specific, recent behavioural examples – stick to the facts, rather than your opinions and perspective, for example: *'I saw you behaving like this, which isn't typical for you.'* Avoid vague statements like: *'You're just not yourself at the moment.'*
- Have the examples ready in front of you.
- Avoid being accusatory or jumping to conclusions – just focus on what you have seen or heard from others (if validated).
- Encourage them to offer their interpretation and comments on what you've said.
- If you both agree that there may be stress-related issues, lead into a discussion around what the issues and causes might be.

Explore causes and problems

- As an initial screening question, ask whether the issues are largely home- or work-related.
- If home-related, refer on to seek appropriate support. You can't be expected to solve an individual's home-based problems for them – you can only signpost the relevant support.



1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

- If work-related, for example, if the problem is due to relationships with a colleague, you will need to explore this in more detail.
- Try to get a feel for whether the problem is consistent and underlying or temporary.
- Be open to consider yourself as part of the problem.
- If the individual regards you as the problem – refer up to the next level.

Taking it forward

Agree and document (if necessary) the following:

- follow-up meeting (if necessary)
- specific approach (could be 'do nothing')
- responsibilities – that is, you may need to go and find out what's possible in terms of interventions
- give as much control to the individual as possible – for example, ask them to go and find out about training course options and report back
- timescales
- any third-party involvement required.

The documentation is for the manager and the member of staff – unless it needs to be part of a referral process.

Follow-up conversations

- Aim to have a follow-up conversation with the individual soon after (ideally within one month) to check any progress made.
- Review progress against the agreed approach – has anything changed?
- Is the agreed approach still appropriate and relevant? If not, make revisions and set new timescales.
- The number of follow-up meetings will vary.
- When the time is right, ensure that you and the individual have a closure meeting to draw a line under it.



CIPD

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
151 The Broadway London SW19 1JQ United Kingdom
T +44 (0)20 8612 6200 **F** +44 (0)20 8612 6201
E cipd@cipd.co.uk **W** cipd.co.uk

Incorporated by Royal Charter
Registered as a charity in England and Wales (1079797)
Scotland (SC045154) and Ireland (20100827)

Issued: April 2021 Reference: 8134 © CIPD 2021