

In UK workplaces, stress isn't just an individual problem — it's a health and safety hazard that your employer must manage. The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines six key areas, or "stressors," that contribute to workplace stress: **demands, control, support, relationships, role, and change**. Understanding these six stress areas is crucial for both employees and managers, especially in small organisations without a dedicated HR department.



Why Stress Matters as a Workplace Health and Safety Hazard

Work-related stress can lead to serious physical and mental health difficulties, and it's an employer's legal duty to prevent it, or at least manage it effectively. Stress falls under the umbrella of work-related ill health recognised by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), who explicitly include stress in their Management Standards approach.

Stress at work is defined by the HSE as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them." When these pressures become chronic, they can cause anxiety, depression, cardiovascular issues and contribute to disability.

Under the **Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974** and the **Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999**, employers have a strict duty to carry out risk assessments that include psychosocial risks such as workplace stress. Ignoring these risks can lead to employee ill health as well as costly legal and reputational damage.

The Six Stress Areas: The Foundation of HSE Stress Risk Assessments

The HSE has developed Management Standards for Work-Related Stress — a benchmark for employers to assess and manage workplace stress. These standards focus on six key areas that research has found to be the primary sources of workplace stress.

1. Demands

The term *demands* refers to workload, work patterns, and the work environment. Are workers given more tasks than they can handle? Are the deadlines unrealistic? Are the physical demands (noise, temperature, vibration,

manual handling) brightonjournal.co.uk appropriate? Excessive or conflicting demands increase stress risk.

2. Control

Control is about how much say individuals have in the way they do their work. Employees who have little control over their tasks, processes, or schedules find it harder to manage their workload and are at greater risk of stress.

3. Support

Support covers the encouragement, sponsorship, and resources provided by managers and colleagues. Lack of support can leave employees feeling isolated or undervalued. Support networks are crucial for coping with workplace pressures.

4. Relationships

Workplace relationships include conflict, bullying, and harassment. Unhealthy relationships with managers and colleagues cause stress directly, and they undermine the effectiveness of teams and communication.

5. Role

Clarity about roles and responsibilities is vital. Employees who don't understand their role or how it fits with others' roles are more likely to experience stress. Role ambiguity and role conflict are common contributors.

6. Change

Change refers to how organisational change is managed and communicated. Poor communication and lack of involvement regarding changes (e.g., restructures, new technology, policy shifts) increases uncertainty and stress levels.

How Employers Use the Six Stress Areas in HSE Stress Risk Assessments

Small employers often find it daunting to tackle workplace stress without a dedicated HR or health and safety specialist. The HSE's Management Standards approach breaks down the complex issue of stress into these six manageable areas and provides tools to benchmark and monitor stress risk.

A typical risk assessment covers:

1. Measuring the level of risk in each stress area through surveys or focus groups
2. Identifying specific stress hazards (eg. excessive demands, bullying)
3. Planning and implementing controls to reduce those risks (eg. workload review, anti-bullying policy)
4. Monitoring effectiveness over time using repeat assessments

This approach means employers can move from vague feelings of "staff are stressed" to specific, actionable interventions. It also ensures compliance with the **Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999**, which require risk assessments to cover all significant hazards — including psychosocial risks.

Stress and the Equality Act 2010: When Does Work-Related Stress Become a Disability?

The Equality Act 2010 offers another reason for employers to take work-related stress seriously. If an employee's stress or mental health condition meets the legal **definition of disability**, employers have additional duties under

the Equality Act to make reasonable adjustments.

According to the Equality Act, a disability is a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on someone's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. Work-related stress that escalates to, for instance, chronic anxiety or depression is often covered by this definition.

Managers should be aware that ignoring signs of work-related stress can shift an employer's legal obligations from health and safety law to equality law — with the latter potentially requiring tailored support or adjustments to work.

Practical Tips for Managers Without an HR Team

Managing the six stress areas doesn't mean reinventing the wheel, especially for small businesses where a single manager often wears many hats. Here's a simple checklist to get started:

- **Demands:** Regularly check workloads and deadlines. Ask: "Is this achievable?"
- **Control:** Give employees choice over how and when they work, where possible.
- **Support:** Foster open communication; make time for informal catch-ups.
- **Relationships:** Address conflict directly; promote respect and zero tolerance of bullying.
- **Role:** Clarify job descriptions and responsibilities; avoid overlaps.
- **Change:** Communicate openly about changes and listen to concerns.

Keeping a simple template or log of issues raised related to these areas can help prioritise improvements and show due diligence.

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Summary Table: The Six Stress Areas and What They Mean

Stress Area	What It Covers	Common Stress Hazards
Demands	Workload, work patterns, physical environment	Excessive workload, tight deadlines, noisy or uncomfortable conditions
Control	Employee autonomy in how, when, and what work is done	No say over tasks, rigid schedules, micromanagement
Support	Help from managers and colleagues, resources, encouragement	Feeling isolated, lack of guidance, poor feedback
Relationships	Interactions with colleagues and managers, workplace culture	Bullying, harassment, conflict, poor communication
Role	Clarity about job responsibilities and expectations	Role ambiguity, overlapping duties, conflicting demands
Change	Management and communication of organisational change	Poorly explained changes, lack of employee involvement, uncertainty

Final Thoughts

Workplace stress is not a personal failing or a test of resilience; it is a predictable health and safety risk that requires concrete, legally compliant management. Using the HSE's six stress areas as a framework provides a clear, practical way for employers — especially those without access to dedicated HR — to assess and reduce stress hazards. This approach protects workers' health, improves wellbeing, and helps businesses thrive.

If you're a manager juggling many responsibilities in your small business, keep this checklist close and turn vague complaints into specific action plans. Remember, stress is a hazard like any other, and the law expects you to tackle it accordingly.