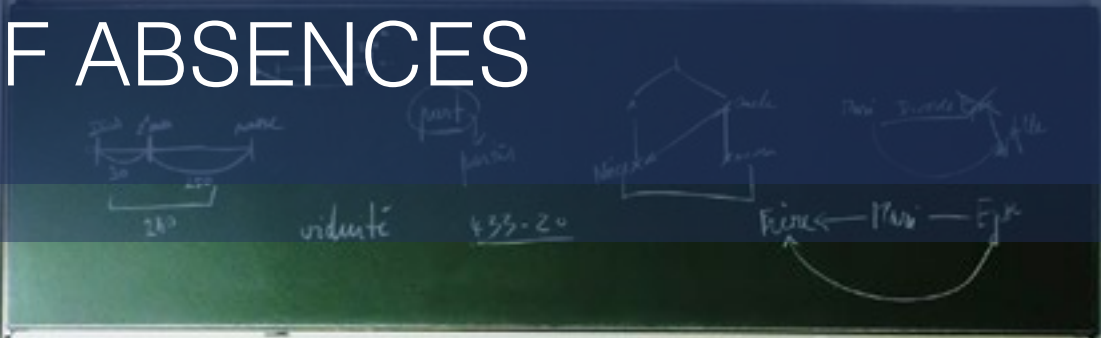


STRESS RELATED STAFF ABSENCES





Introduction

Most of us will feel stress at work in one way or another. Physiological symptoms of stress such as the release of adrenaline are a healthy and necessary bodily reaction. In moderation these are nothing to worry about.

However continuous or overwhelming levels of stress can become unmanageable and will have a detrimental physiological and psychological impact.

As you will discover from this report, stress is prevalent within schools. Given the tight budgets and staffing levels which schools operate to, staff absences are particularly costly to the operation of a school.

At Absence Protection we have more than 10 years' experience in insuring schools against staff absence and therefore we know first-hand how prevalent stress is and how costly it can be. Following on from an interview on BBC Radio 4 and BBC News, we have put this report together to share some of the data we have collected over the years, as well as offering feedback to schools on how the problem can be budgeted for, managed and mitigated.

For more information on any of the information or data within this report, or to discuss how we can support you with your stress related absences please contact using the below contact details.

We hope you find this report useful and thank you for reading!

health@absenceprotection.co.uk

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The science behind stress

Stress is a broad term used to describe negative emotional and social reactions, and in extreme instances mental ill-health.

The hypothalamus is a region in the base of the brain which controls the release of different hormones and is responsible for regulating things like body temperature, thirst, hunger, sleep, circadian rhythms, moods and sex drive. Specifically it regulates the release of adrenaline and cortisol.

Adrenaline raises your heartbeat, increasing blood pressure, whilst cortisol triggers the release of glucose into the blood stream.

Together a release of these hormones gives you a burst of energy whilst also suppressing other, seemingly less immediate bodily functions such as digestion. This is the body preparing itself for a 'fight or flight' reaction.

From a physiological perspective a little stress is healthy and our bodies' response to this will usually regulate itself. However when we experience stress that is too intense or prolonged, too much adrenaline and cortisol will be released into the blood stream and our bodies will no longer be able to self-regulate.

There can be all sorts of physical and mental health implications to this, which include headaches, an impaired immune system, stomach upsets, high blood pressure (and in extreme cases this can lead to heart attacks), anger issues, anxiety and depression. Secondary effects can also include insomnia, relationship issues, amnesia and changeable moods.



The causes of stress

Everyone is different and what we find stressful varies from person to person.

Some people thrive on public speaking whilst others find the idea terrifying. What we find stressful varies from person to person.

However there are causes of stress common to most, and some factors which statistically increase the risk of stress.

Some of the most commonly cited external reasons for stress are work related and are particularly common within education, perhaps explaining why stress related absences are so common within schools. These include a demanding, pressurised working environment, heavy workloads and stringent budgets.

Other non-work related factors can include marital problems, health issues, bereavement, financial worries or a hectic family life.

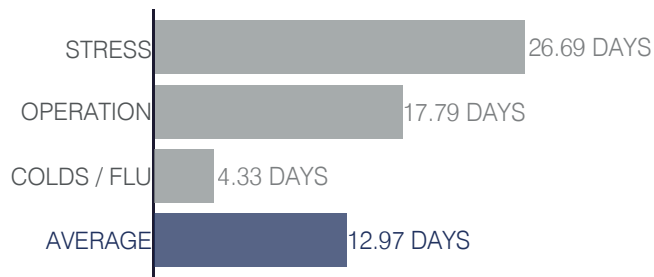
There are also internal reasons which commonly cause stress including chronic worry, anxiety, perfectionism, a lack of flexibility and pessimism.

According to a study conducted by the BBC in 2011, certain events earlier on in life significantly increased the risk of stress. These include bullying in early years or adulthood, a history of mental health problems, lower socioeconomic status, poorer education and relationship problems.

When understanding an individual's reasons for being stressed it's always important to remain impartial and unprejudiced. Remember, we have all lived very different lives and are all affected by social and physical situations differently.

Stress related absences

Average length of absences...



The average length of an absence is 12.97 working days. By contrast the average stress related absence is more than twice as long at 26.69 working days – over five weeks. With the exception of maternity, heart problems or serious diseases, a stress related absence is longer than any other type of absence.

Prevalence of stress related absences...

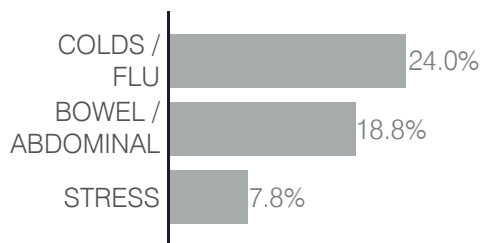
3.7%

Every year 3.7% of teaching staff and 3.0% of support staff take an absence due to stress. Teaching staff are 25.6% more likely to take a stress related absence than support staff.

57.7%

On average 57.7% of schools will have at least one member of staff absent due to stress at some point during the year.

Top 3 causes of absences...



Stress is the third most prevalent reason for staff absence periods of any length, after colds, flu and viral infections and bowel / abdominal problems.

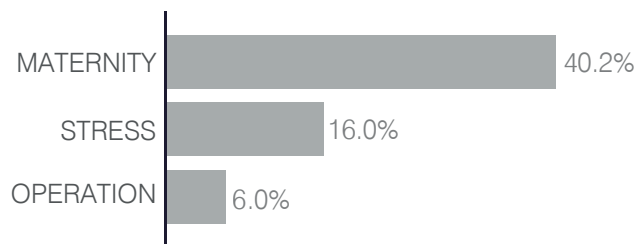
In other words 7.78% of every absence taken by a member of staff is due to stress.

Annual days taken absent due to stress per member of staff - by region...

There is a noticeable difference regionally in the amount of days absent due to stress, with Wales and Yorkshire taking almost three times as many days off than the South East.

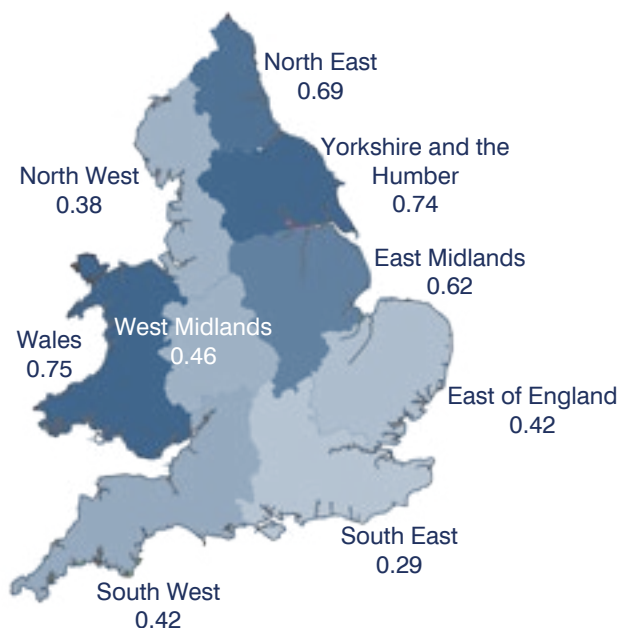
In Wales for example a school that employs 100 staff is likely to lose 75 working days per year due to stress, whereas a school in the South East of England is only likely to lose 29.

Top 3 causes of absence days ...



Aside from maternity, stress is the biggest reason for absence days. 16.02% of all days taken absent within schools are due to stress. This means that amongst males it is the single biggest reason for absence days.

This is almost three times greater than the next most prevalent cause of absences which is operations, responsible for 5.97% of all absence days.





What can we learn from all this?

This data shows how common stress is within the education sector. However it's important to understand how this data is relevant to your school and what implications it may have.

Most notably these findings tell us of the prevalence of stress within the education sector. Every year 3.53% of staff will take an absence due to stress, which is likely to last an average of 26.69 days.

This is likely to be even higher in Wales and some northern parts of England.

As the third highest reason for any period of absence and, aside from maternity, the single biggest cause of absence days, stress poses a very real threat to the wellbeing of a school's workforce and therefore the day-to-day operation of a school.

Such is the prevalence of stress within schools that steps should be taken to offer staff pastoral support wherever possible to limit the risk of stress occurring or reduce the effects of stress.

Schools also need to accept that stress related absences are inevitable and whilst they can be reduced, they can't be eliminated. Therefore schools need to plan and budget for stress related absences by putting contingencies in place.

In the following section we will suggest a few of the ways schools can prepare for staff absences and how we can help you to manage the effect and prevalence of stress



Managing stress related absences: Planning



Planning for stress related absences.

As with all absences, stress related absences are unfortunate but inevitable. Therefore schools need to be financially and operationally prepared to cope with the absence. This means implementing a strategy and factoring this into your annual budgets.

There are three ways to financially plan for stress related absences.

The first option is to self-cover by hiring a full-time member of cover staff, who would be available to take any lessons or fulfil any duties of the absent member of staff. For larger schools this may be a practical solution, but for smaller schools this could prove to be too cost inefficient.

The upside to this is that you will have a member of staff available who knows the school and the procedures, however the downside is that the individual can only cover one full-time equivalent member of staff. If more than one person is absent at any given time further expense could be generated.

The second option is to self-cover by making financial provisions. Usually this means putting some budget aside for staff absences, and dipping into it to cover the cost of supply teachers or new hires as a result of long term absences.

The downside to this is the gamble you are making with the school's

finances. Depending on how much you allocate to this section of the budget, you may stray considerably over that with just a single long-term absence.

The final solution is to take out a staff absence insurance policy, ensuring you choose one which covers you for stress related absences. As long as you take out a benefits policy (rather than an indemnity policy) you can still choose either of the first two options and continue to claim against your policy.

At Absence Protection we offer this type of policy, and many of our clients will choose to hire a full-time cover teacher as well as taking out an insurance policy, that way all the income from any claims made will cover the cost of the supply teacher, and in the event of a cluster of absences or any particularly costly absences the insurance will continue to cover them meaning that they aren't left out of pocket.



Managing stress related absences: Prevention



Preventing stress related absences.

Although stress is inevitable, in some instances it is avoidable.

Employers have a responsibility to promote the occupational wellbeing of staff. It is advantageous for morale and the smooth running of the school to keep motivation and attendance high.

An important way to prevent stress is to identify the early signs of it and address them immediately. Some of the things to look out for include insomnia, a feeling of being overwhelmed with work, negative or depressed feelings, self-blame or disappointment, loss of motivation, mood swings, change in eating habits and increased smoking, drinking or drug taking.

We suggest five key steps to manage levels of stress thereby avoiding stress related absence:

1. Avoid unnecessary stress

Stress can't always be avoided, and it isn't healthy or appropriate to shirk responsibilities. However there will be a surprising amount of stressors in your life that can be eliminated. For example if there are individuals in your social life or work life who cause unnecessary stress avoid them.

If there are other things in your environment which you find stressful, such as traffic on a particular route to work, try and avoid them too.

You must also know your limits and not take on any more than you can cope with. It's important to know when to say "no".

2. Attitude changes

Arguably the toughest but most important way to eliminate stress is through a change in attitude. Often you can't change or eliminate the thing that's making you stressed, so you need to change the way you deal with it. This is a technique that counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy will teach you.

Some of the ways we can do this is by reframing problems and looking at the bigger picture, adjusting your standards by not always seeking perfection and above all, focussing on the positives.



Managing stress related absences: Prevention (contd.)



3. Behavioural changes

It's important to accept that not everything is within our control so we need to let these things go and concentrate on being assertive with respect to the things that are within our control. For instance express your feelings rather than bottling them up, which may include speaking to your line manager or HR Manager or even seeking counselling or therapy.

It is also beneficial to concentrate on effective time management to ensure you aren't stretched too thin or running behind schedule.

4. Work / life balance

It's something of a cliché but a work / life balance is important to our mental and physical health. Extra-curricular activities like socialising and exercising are important, and if you have a hobby such as gardening, art, sport or something hands on like restoring a car, you should try to do that as regularly as possible.

In short, do something every day that makes you happy.

5. A healthy lifestyle

A healthy lifestyle will support your body with any physiological reactions to the stress you encounter. Eating healthily, reducing the amount of nicotine, caffeine or alcohol you consume will help, as getting the necessary amount of sleep and exercising regularly.



Managing stress related absences: Shortening



Shortening stress related absences.

In some instances it may not always be possible to recognise the symptoms of stress in an individual until it's too late and they are forced to take time off work due to stress. However there are still supportive measure which can be taken to help the individual's recovery and coach them back into work.

The five key steps in the 'preventing stress related absences' section are still applicable and should be practiced. Whilst an individual is not in the working environment these steps should be easier to achieve as there is likely going to be less exposure to the stressors, and there is more time to concentrate on therapeutic activity.

Many believe that a member of staff absent due to stress should not be contacted during their absence period. This is not the case. A supportive employer should be in

regular contact with the absentee, offering the appropriate therapy and taking time to understand the individual's condition.

In such circumstances occupational health reports can be valuable to understand more about the individual's condition, what help can be offered and when the individual can be expected to return to work. Whilst a doctor's sign off note may seem indicative of an expected return date, it is entirely possible that a further sign off note will be issued. Similarly it may be the case that with the appropriate support and guidance the individual will recover earlier than the expected date and will be able to return to work sooner. Although it is vital not to be pushy, keeping in regular contact with the employee will also encourage this.

About Absence Protection



About Absence Protection

Thank you for taking time to read our insights into stress related absences. We hope you found this useful and now have a better idea of how you can prepare for and minimise stress amongst your workforce.

We are specialists and longstanding experts in the provision of staff absence management services. We are the only company to offer an 'AA-' rated (by Standard and Poor's) staff absence insurance policy, giving our schools complete peace of mind. Additionally we

offer a comprehensive range of occupational health, HR and wellbeing services designed to reduce the prevalence and impact of stress within the education sector.

If you think your organisation could benefit from support with your staff absence management or stress management we would be delighted to discuss some of the options available to you, just get in touch today.

health@absenceprotection.co.uk
0800 862 0077

Disclaimer

All data is anonymous and correct as at 1st March 2015. The data is based on genuine claims and absences recorded by Absence Protection.

Absence Protection is a trading name of Absence Protection Limited registered in England

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Stress related staff absences

2015



Read about stress related absences on BBC News [here...](#)

...or listen to our interview on Radio 4 [here](#).

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