

Feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or physically unwell because of your job isn't <https://brightonjournal.co.uk/health-at-work-what-brighton-employees-should-know-about-their-rights-and-wellbeing/> just an unfortunate side effect of modern working life – it's a serious health and safety concern. But is stress at work really something employers must manage as a 'hazard', just like slips, trips or lifting heavy equipment? And what does the law say about your rights if work-related stress is damaging your health?

If you've been asking yourself, *"Work stress is making me ill – is that a health and safety issue?"* then this guide is for you. We'll explore what counts as a stress hazard at work, how the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines work-related stress, the legal duty your employer has to assess and reduce stress risks, and how the Equality Act 2010 disability definition might protect you if stress develops into a health condition.

## Understanding Stress as a Health and Safety Hazard

Stress is often dismissed as a "personal resilience" problem or something outside the employer's control. But that attitude ignores what the **Health and Safety Executive (HSE)** has been clear about for years: **work-related stress is a workplace hazard just like chemical exposure or machinery risks.**



HSE defines a **stress hazard at work** as aspects of work design or organisation that can cause psychological or physical harm. This includes:

- Unrealistic deadlines or workloads
- Poor management or lack of support
- Job insecurity or changes without consultation
- Bullying or harassment at work
- Poor communication or role ambiguity

When employers fail to manage these hazards, illness can develop – including anxiety, depression, cardiovascular problems, or musculoskeletal disorders. That's why work-related stress is squarely a health and safety issue that requires assessment, control measures, and monitoring.

## The HSE's Legal Approach: Work-Related Stress Legal Duty and Risk Assessments

Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 (Regulation 3), employers have a legal duty to assess all workplace health and safety risks – including psychological risks like stress. In other words, employers must carry out **stress risk assessments**.

An effective *stress risk assessment* means:

1. Identifying workplace stress hazards (e.g. excessive workload, lack of control, bullying)
2. Assessing which workers are at risk and how
3. Implementing control measures (e.g. workload adjustments, support systems, training for managers)
4. Reviewing and monitoring these controls regularly

This is not an optional wellbeing ‘nice to have’ – it is a legal obligation under health and safety law. Failure to do so can lead to enforcement action by HSE or an employment tribunal claim for stress-related disability discrimination or constructive dismissal.

## **The HSE Management Standards: A Practical Benchmark**

The HSE Management Standards for Work-Related Stress offer the most widely used framework outlining how employers can identify and control stress risks. The Standards specify six key areas to assess:

|               |                                                                        |         |                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Stress Hazard | Area Description                                                       | Demands | Workload, work patterns, and the work environment                                                                                   |
| Control       | How much say a person has in the way they do their work                | Support | Encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues                               |
| Relationships | Avoiding conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour              | Role    | Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures they don't have conflicting roles |
| Change        | How organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated |         |                                                                                                                                     |

Using these Standards as a benchmark means your employer should be assessing each of these areas, so that stress risks can be spotted and acted upon.

## **When Does Stress Count as a Disability Under the Equality Act 2010?**

Not all stress at work is a ‘health and safety’ matter in isolation. Sometimes stress causes or worsens a mental or physical health condition, which has legal protections under the Equality Act 2010. This Act defines disability as:



*"A physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities."*

If your work stress amounts to a disability:

- Your employer has an extra duty to make **reasonable adjustments** (e.g., flexible hours, changes in workload, time off for treatment)
- They must avoid discrimination, harassment, or victimisation related to your condition
- You may have stronger protection if you raise concerns or claim constructive dismissal or discrimination

Don't let vague worries count as 'just stress' – if your symptoms last many months and affect daily life, consider discussing with your GP and exploring how the Equality Act applies.

## What Should You Do If Work Stress Is Making You Ill?

If you are suffering from stress caused or worsened by work, here's a practical checklist for managing the situation:

1. **Write down:** Specific examples of work tasks, behaviours, or situations that increase your stress. (E.g., "Unrealistic targets from my line manager each week" or "Waiting 2 months for support on workload changes.")
2. **Check if your employer has done a stress risk assessment:** Request a copy or ask about policies around stress and wellbeing.
3. **Speak to your manager or your workplace contact:** Email them a clear list of your concerns and what adjustments might help (e.g., reduced hours temporarily).
4. **Book a GP appointment:** Describe your symptoms and get a medical opinion. Ask about a note if you need sick leave or adjustments.
5. **Consider your rights:** If stress is a disability, you may ask for reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010.
6. **Seek advice:** Reach out to advisory bodies like HSE, ACAS, or a citizens advice bureau for tailored support.

### What NOT to do:

- Don't just accept "it's personal resilience" talk – stress hazards are workplace risks.
- Don't rely on "just speak to HR" if your organisation has no HR department – approach your manager or owner directly with documented concerns.
- Don't ignore physical symptoms – stress can cause or worsen conditions that are recognised by law.

## Sharing This Important Information

If you found this post useful, please help spread awareness that work-related stress is a real health and safety issue and that workers have rights under UK law. You can share this article easily across your favourite social channels:

- WhatsApp
- Facebook
- Instagram (post & story suggestion: share key tips)
- TikTok (create short video explaining work stress hazards)
- Twitter/X

- YouTube (upload explainer or personal story)
- Telegram
- Viber
- Pinterest

Replace [YOUR\_URL] with the blog page link to make sharing easy!

## Final Thoughts

Don't accept stress-causing work conditions as "normal" or your personal failing. Work stress is officially recognised by HSE as a workplace hazard and covered by health and safety law. Your employer has a *legal duty* to assess and manage these risks under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, using practical tools like the HSE Management Standards.

If work stress is seriously affecting your health, it might qualify as a disability under the Equality Act, bringing additional protections. Knowing your specific rights, putting your concerns in writing, seeking medical advice, and prompting your employer to act can all help you stay safe and healthy at work.

Remember: stress is not a sign that you need "to toughen up" or "resilience training". It's a specific health and safety hazard, and managing it properly is a legal obligation for employers of all sizes.

*Take action now to protect your health — your wellbeing and legal rights matter.*