Stress has become a more recognised term over the past decade and is a major cause for concern for much of the nursing workforce. Stress can

Stress and nursing

Research and anecdotal evidence confirms that nursing is a stressful job. The most recent Royal College of Nursing survey (2013) into stress in nursing found high levels of stress amongst respondents with long working hours combined with unrealistic time pressures and unachievable deadlines being the main causes. Nurses reported distress at not being able to deliver high standards of care due to the pressure of work.

Nursing is a role that requires an expenditure of energy on many levels. Physically, the job can be demanding with high levels of muscular-skeletal stress, culminating in many aches and pains. Mentally, you are required to be 'on the ball', making calculations for medication and responding to important questions from patients and relatives. It often feels like many balls are being juggled in the air at the same time. Emotionally, the impact is felt when you empathise and help people, and from the toll of working in an environment where there is pain and sadness.

The context of your work may be characterised by resource constraints, poor staff support and organisational change, which add to the energy expended. Research since 1908 has shown that for peak performance there is an optimal level of pressure denoted by a healthy tension between feeling relaxed and energised (see the pressure graph below). Not enough pressure and we
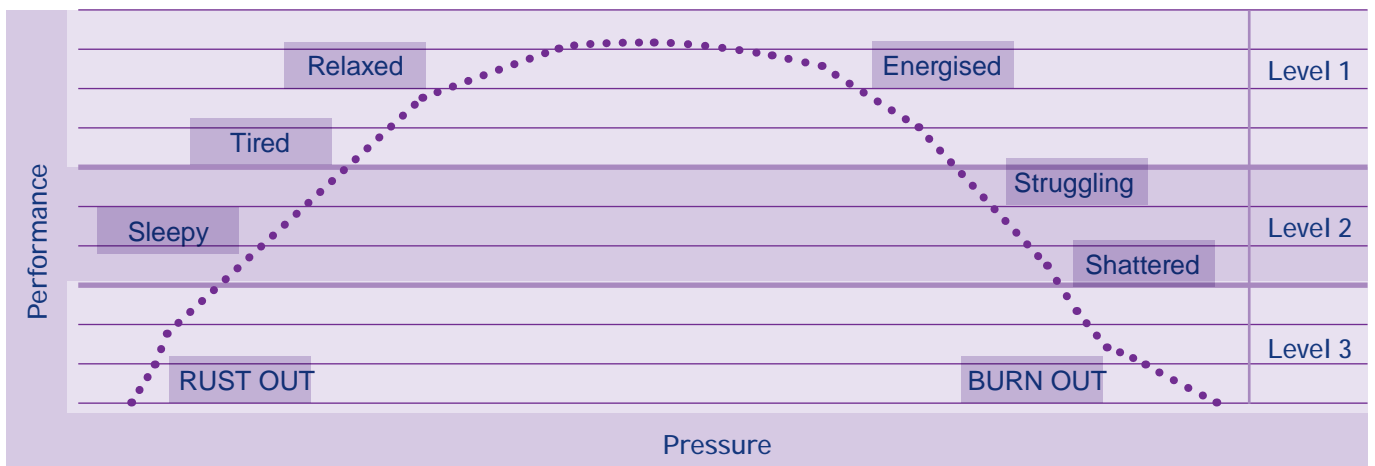
feel sleepy and tired – we 'rust out'. Too much pressure/stress brings the discomfort of finding ourselves struggling – we 'burn out'.

Nursing staff are brilliant at coping and often have a strong belief that they should be able to cope with anything at all that comes along in their personal or professional domains. This belief generates a superhuman philosophy that doesn't make it easy for nurses to admit that they are experiencing stress. People who know you well at work or at home may be trying to tell you to slow down, to 'take time out', or you may be experiencing the 'stop the world I want to get off ' syndrome, but the temptation is to carry on regardless. It is a 'nurse till you drop' philosophy.

There is some good news: showing signs of stress does not mean you cannot cope – nurses are as human as anyone else, there are limits to the pressures that you can endure. To admit to being stressed does not equal not coping (although it can feel that way), quite the opposite, knowing and owning your limitations enables you to look for ways of coping more effectively so enhancing the range of coping mechanisms that you already have.

> If you can take care of yourself the more effective you will be in your capacity to care for others.

Pressure/performance graph

Graph with axes labelled Performance (vertical) and Pressure (horizontal). Curve labels: Relaxed, Energised (Level 1), Tired, Struggling, Sleepy (Level 2), Shattered, RUST OUT, BURN OUT (Level 3).

Behaviours

You may:

- become withdrawn and not want to socialise

- increase your alcohol, nicotine or drugs intake

- under eat or over eat

- become accident prone and careless

- become impatient, aggressive or compulsive – pacing, fidgeting, swearing, blaming, throwing and hitting!

- work longer hours – not take breaks, take work home, procrastinate with important projects, take the 'headless chicken' approach when under pressure, and manage your time poorly

- no longer have time for leisure activities.

Feelings

You may feel:

- irritable

- angry

- depressed

- jealous

- restless

- anxious

- unreal or hyper alert

- unnecessarily guilty.

You may experience:

- panic

- mood swings, crying easily.

Individual responses to stress vary, so you may experience some of these some of the time. This will be your body's way of saying that you are overdoing things and it is time to reflect and take action in order to reduce and manage the stress response.

Headaches
Frequent infections
Muscle aches/twitches
Breathlessness
Skin irritations
Fatigue

Worrying
Muddled thinking
Impaired judgement
Nightmares
Indecisions
Hasty decisions
Negativity

Stress

More fussy
Loss of confidence
Irritability
Depression
Apathy
Alienation

Low libido
Accident prone
Loss of appetite
Drinking more
Smoking more
Eating more
Insomnia

Reducing and managing stress

As mentioned previously showing signs of stress does not mean you cannot cope and pressure can help you accomplish tasks. Here we are talking about the kind of pressure you may experience for example before a job interview, a presentation at work or an exam as it can help you stay focused and may support you to perform at your best.

As an individual you need to remain alert to pressure turning into stress and this varies from individual to individual as we all respond to pressure and stress differently.

If you are able to identify with even one, or several or most stress responses as listed on pages 6-7 then there is a need to take steps to alleviate these.

Relaxed and energised

Before we address how to manage stress, it is important to maintain your wellbeing and self-care in order to prevent, physical, emotional and psychological manifestations of stress. Referring back to the pressure performance graph, page 5, to be able to stay relaxed and energised the following strategies may be helpful.

Lifestyle management

you live to work or work to live?(e perf)15.1(ormanc)15(e gr)10(aph, page be hid31.288 -1.973 Td69T7A)kF001Wha ns of rbd on paindividual to identify with (x)20(ed and ener)30.1(gised the)TJ1.2 TD(y)10(ou liv)10.1(e t)5(o w)5(ork

- Maintain a balance between work and play – do
  you live to work or work to live?(e perf)15.1(ormanc)15(e gr)10(aph, page be hid31.288 -1.973 Td69T73 TtualTeSpa

- Career advice may be useful if you are stressed and frustrated with your career development. It can help you gain greater awareness of your career values, interest and needs.

Consider your thinking skills

- When stressed be mindful of 'unhelpful thinking habits' for example, 'I must be perfect, I must never make a mistake' – find ways of thinking more realistically 'I am doing the best that I can in difficult circumstances'.

- Avoid mind reading, jumping to conclusions, black and white thinking, catastrophising. Likewise avoid generalisation, for example, 'this always happens to me', ask yourself 'where's the evidence, what are the facts?'.

- Challenge pressure you put on yourself by turning musts, oughts and shoulds into likes and preferences from 'I must complete this task today' to 'I'd like to complete today and I will do what I can'.

- Learn to identify what you can and can't control and acknowledge what can't be avoided, Why waste energy banging your head against a brick wall that is not going to give way? Much better to invest the energy into finding a way under or around the wall!

Managing your personal perceptions of stress

- Use constructive self-talk and avoid putting yourself down – acknowledge your achievements and regularly give yourself 'a pat on the back'.

- Maintain a sense of proportion and remember that you have managed to get through difficulties before.

- Think about what helped you through a previous difficulty – how did you do that? It may give you some clues and instil hope that there is a way forward.

- Remember too that you are not superhuman!

Top tips

- Aim for the healthy tension between being relaxed and energised.

- Regularly assess your stress response and the current stresses as stress can creep up unawares.

- Plan ahead for expected increases in stress.

- Find out what works best for you in terms of reducing and managing your stress.

- Try out new ideas that may work well for you.

- Remember, feeling stressed does not equal not coping.

- It is OK to seek help when stressed.

- Remember that your employer carries a responsibility for your health and safety at work, which includes your emotional/mental health as well as your physical wellbeing.

Struggling

If you are struggling as your stress levels increase and you are experiencing physical and emotional health problems then the additional responses below will help you to reduce and manage your stresses.

Relaxation

- Learning to relax is a key to managing the stress response – relaxation tells your brain that the threat has diminished and the 'flight or fight' response can be switched off.

- Do things that you enjoy doing which have a relaxing effect on you, for example, listen to a particular piece of music, a long soak in the bath, reading a book, a walk in a favourite place, socialising, a hobby – plan to treat yourself with more of these simple pleasures which may have been cancelled from your normal routine.

- Many relaxation CDs, apps and internet downloads are available which can, when used regularly, have a significant impact on helping you to relax.

- Relaxation techniques can then be transferred wherever you are when you feel yourself becoming tense.

- There is also meditation, mindfulness and other helpful alternatives such as massage,

Medical support

- Visit your GP and/or access occupational health support if available – this is not an admission of weakness, it can be a courageous first step towards a relaxed and energised level.

- A prescribed break from work will give you some time out to recover and, whilst there are many ways that can make it easier for you to reduce and manage stress as outlined in the previous paragraphs, there are times when medical interventions are helpful.

- Medication can control symptoms enough to enable you to put into practice some of the methods already outlined.

Counselling

- Counselling is often helpful as a way of giving yourself a regular space to reflect on what is happening emotionally, mentally and physically, and to have support for any changes you want to make.

- You may have feelings and thoughts that seem out of control that you need help with, which may be frightening and may be a new experience for you, so there will be the opportunity to explore and understand these.

- There may be new coping strategies to learn which a counsellor can help you with, such as relaxation, assertion, time management and thinking skills.

- You may decide to see a counsellor as an individual or you may wish to join a group. You can ask your GP about counselling or your employer may provide access to a counsellor through occupational health, an in-house service or an Employee Assistance Provider (EAP), the RCN also provides a counselling service.

- You may choose to access help privately, professional regulating bodies such as The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP), British Association for Behavioural & Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP), The British Psychological Society (BPS) allow you to search for therapists locally.

Work-related stress

What to expect from your employer

There are a variety of ways to manage pressures at work, and the good news is that not all the responsibility for reducing workplace stress rests on your shoulders. Although there is no specific legislation that covers stress at work, your employer should deal with stress as an occupational health and safety hazard, and take action to control factors in the workplace that contribute to stress. The Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) places a duty on employers to ensure that, as far as is reasonably practicable, workplaces are safe and healthy environments. It can be argued that work-related stress is a health and safety issue if stress is caused, or made worse, through work. Under the Management of Health and Safety Regulations (1999), employers must consider hazards in the workplace and assess the level of risk that the hazard poses for employees. Once the degree of risk has been assessed, action must be taken to control the risk and eliminate the likelihood of employees being harmed.

Organisational impact of work-related stress

Work-related stress can impact on an organisation in a number of ways:

Staff attitude and behaviour

- Loss of motivation and commitment.
- Staff working increasingly long hours but for diminishing returns.
- Erratic or poor timekeeping.
- Poor morale and a lack of engagement.
- Increased intentions to leave job.

Sickness absence

- Increase in overall sickness absence, in particular, frequent short periods of absence.

Presenteeism

- Increased levels of presenteeism, with staff coming into work when they are unwell.

Relationships at work

- Tension and conflict between colleagues and teams.
- Poor relationships with clients/patients.
- Increase in industrial relations or disciplinary problems.

Work performance

- Reduction in output or productivity.
- Increase in incidents and error rates.
- Poor decision making.
- Deterioration in planning and control of work.

Addressing these areas can be good for your employer, resulting in increased performance at work, a decrease in sickness absence, improved retention and recruitment of staff, reducing litigation costs and an improvement in staff morale and relationships at work. There is a real cost benefit in both human resource and financial terms.

Impact on patient outcomes

The *B   a   * (Department of Health, 2009) found a clear link between the health and wellbeing of the NHS England workforce and the quality of patient outcomes. Research led by Professor Jill Maben for the National Institute for Health Research (National Institute for Health Research and Delivery and Organisation, 2012) also demonstrated that there is a clear relationship between staff wellbeing and patient care performance. Factors found to be linked to

staff wellbeing and patient outcomes included good local team working; high levels of co-worker support; good job satisfaction; supervisor support; good organisational culture and low levels of emotional exhaustion.

Ensuring these factors are in place through implementing stress risk assessments is not only a benefit to the member of staff but also to patients.

Ways your employer can reduce stress in the workplace

There are several actions an employer can do to address workplace stress:

- implement a stress policy which includes guidance on how to manage stress in the workplace and the process for assessing the causes of workplace stress

- provide staff support such as counselling, mentoring, coaching, training or supervision

- carry out a risk assessment and implement additional policies that are linked to common causes of stress, such as violence, bullying

Staff support

Your employer also has responsibility for ensuring that staff support systems are available to you. These may include formal or informal groups, either for clinical or other supervision, or mentoring, which is another method of professional support such as Schwartz rounds.

Stress policy

Your employer may want to think about introducing a stress policy if this is not already in place. These are guidelines for managing stress in the work environment and should include: recognising stress at work as a health and safety problem; access to counselling; assessing the causes of stress in the workplace; introducing measures to reduce and prevent stress, and arrangements for employees suffering the results of stress.

Stress management training

Your employer may want to provide regular in-house training events or to encourage staff to attend stress management training events that are available locally. Many people know what it is that stresses them at work and having the opportunity to voice and explore these concerns may be a valuable aspect of a training event. Employers may also provide training programmes on building resilience or access to on-line mindfulness programmes.

Schwartz rounds

These are meetings which provide an opportunity for staff from all disciplines across the0 18 42.5197 r.boGsd

Getting help from the RCN

RCN representatives

Your employer has a duty to ensure your health and safety at work – and that includes the psychological wellbeing of employees. If you have concerns about stress, you must raise these with your manager as soon as possible, preferably in writing and ask for remedial action to be taken such as a risk assessment of stress. It is also important that your employer implements a stress policy if they do not already have one – and that it is being followed.

If you are a member, you should also speak to your RCN safety representative to gain their support in raising concerns about work-related stress with your employer. RCN safety representatives ensure the health, safety and welfare of all members in the workplace by promoting and supporting the employer in implementing a culture where members can work in a safe and healthy environment.

If you are already off work due to stress, you may need to contact your RCN steward for advice. RCN stewards can support members through informal or formal process such as sickness absence reviews or grievances relating to bullying and harassment.

If your concerns relate to lack of appraisals or learning and development opportunities then RCN learning representatives may be able to help.

If there is no RCN representative in your workplace or you are unsure who to speak to contact RCN Direct for further advice. RCN Direct can be contacted on 0345 772 6100, they also have a range of on line advice at www.rcn.org.uk/direct

Remember if you feel that working conditions are impacting on patients or your ability to care for patients safely then, as a registered nurse, you have a professional duty to raise a concern. For further information and advice on raising concerns visit: www.rcn.org.uk/support/raising_concerns

RCN Membership Support Services

Member Support Services consists of five constituent services:

• Careers Service

• Counselling Service

• Immigration Advice Service

• Welfare Rights and Guidance Service

• Peer Support Service.

As a member of the RCN you are entitled to access our support services. Short-term counselling is available and may be beneficial to you if you are experiencing stress or subsequent confidence issues. Counselling is available for issues whether they are perceived to be work-related or not.

Welfare Rights and Guidance can advise you on your benefits eligibility if your wage reduces due to sickness absence or reduced hours; or if you have to leave your job. A money and debt advice service is also available.

If you are feeling stressed because of an immigration issue call our Immigration Advice Service for assistance.

Careers advice including exploring options at a career crossroads and preparing for interviews is available and may help restore confidence following a period of stress.

Finally, ill and disabled members can sign up for peer support to share experiences with others for mutual support. The Membership Support Service can be contacted on 0345 408 4391 or visit www.rcn.org.uk/mss

Legal support

If you are experiencing stress at an unacceptable level in your workplace, there are a number of potential legal remedies that you can pursue with the RCN to prevent a stressful state of affairs continuing, or to obtain redress if you have suffered illness caused by occupational stress.

Initiating legal action does not always mean a successful conclusion, and can itself be stressful. It should only be considered when other methods such as workplace representatives raising concerns, have failed, and it is clear that you or your colleagues are being made ill from excessive occupational stress.

Legal steps can include:

- employment claims

- personal injury claims.

Employment claims

Actions you may wish to consider if you are suffering from a clinically recognisable psychiatric illness due to occupational stress, but are still employed, include:

- taking out a grievance. This could be against your manager or a co-worker, for example, in a situation where bullying has occurred

- discrimination claim through the Employment Tribunal on the grounds of sex, race, disability, age, sexual orientation, religious (and political opinion in Northern Ireland) beliefs or trade union membership/activities against the employer and/or discriminator

- a civil action and/or injunction through the courts, or a complaint to the police that can lead to a prosecution using the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 (Protection from Harassment (NI) Order 1997) on the grounds of harassment

- a claim of unfair dismissal. In some cases, it can be argued that your employer's treatment is a breach of contract serious enough to justify your resignation – you then claim unfair dismissal through the Employment Tribunal on the grounds of constructive dismissal.

Because these cases are very difficult to win, you should never take any steps towards such an action without first consulting the RCN.

Time limits

Note that time limits are tight for applications to the Employment Tribunal. They may be as short as three months from the date of dismissal or act of discrimination. So, always contact your RCN Direct for advice as soon as possible.

Personal injury claims

Personal injury claims on the grounds of psychiatric injury are hard to prove. The employer owes you a duty of care, but a lot turns on the 'reasonableness' of the employer's actions, including what steps could have been taken, based on the employer's knowledge, to avoid psychiatric harm being caused.

Time limits

The time limits for bringing a personal injury claim are strict. Legal proceedings must be begun no later than three years from the date when you knew you were suffering from stress as a result of work. A late claim will be time barred and you will not be able to sue for compensation without special permission of the courts, which they do not readily give.

Alternatives to trial at court

Record keeping

If you are suffering from stress at work, you should keep accurate records and seek help as soon as possible. You should:

• keep a record of all dates, events and symptoms suffered and copies of any relevant documentation keep a personal record of all working hours, including those outside the normal place of work

• make complaints in writing to your employer about unfavourable conditions and keep copies

• seek medical advice from your doctor and occupational health department, and make sure that a clinical diagnosis is noted in medical certificates (rather than describing the symptoms as 'stress')

• when a particular incident has occurred (for example, serious bullying or harassment), complete an accident report form and ensure the incident is recorded as an industrial accident

• lodge the incident as an industrial accident by completing form BI 100A from the Government website www.gov.uk/industrial-injuries-disablement-benefit/overview Keep copies of these completed forms.

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Further information and resources

NHS Choices www.NHS.uk

MIND www.mind.org.uk

International Stress Management Association
www.isma.org.uk

Samaritans www.samaritans.org

NICE guidelines on promoting mental wellbeing at
work www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph22

Health and Safety Executive
www.hse.gov.uk/stress

Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland
www.hseni.gov.uk/stress.htm

NHS Scotland Partnership Information Network
Managing Health at Work (including dealing
with stress)
Available at www.staffgovernance.scot.nhs.uk
search 'pin policies NHS Scotland'

NHS Staff Council's Health, Safety and Wellbeing
Partnership Group guidance
Available at www.nhsemployers.org search
'Health, Safety and Wellbeing Partnership Group
guidance'

RCN Direct

Telephone 0345 772 6100

Online advice is available at
www.rcn.org.uk/direct

**RCN Membership Support Services –
Counselling**

Contact the counselling service on 0345 408 4391
seven days a week 8.30am- 8.30pm to make an
appointment or email mss@rcn.org.uk

For more information visit www.rcn.org.uk/mss

Appendix:
HSE's Management Standards

HSE Management Standards

Background

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has developed the Management Standards, an evidence-based approach to tackling work-related stress. These Standards represent a set of conditions that, if present, reflect a high level of health, well-being and organisational performance. This approach helps those who have key roles in promoting organisational and individual health and well-being to develop systems to prevent illness resulting from stress.

The standards are split into six domains which are detailed below. They are widely used by organisations to assess the risk of stress to employees and identify what measures need to be put in place to manage those risks.

Management Standards: Demands

Includes issues such as workload, work patterns, and the work environment.

The Standard is that:

- employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs

- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/States to be achieved:

- the organisation provides employees with adequate and achievable demands in relation to the agreed hours of work

- people's skills and abilities are matched to the job demands

- jobs are designed to be within the capabilities of employees

- employees' concerns about their work environment are addressed.

Management Standards: Control

How much say the person has in the way they do their work.

The Standard is that:

- employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work

- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/States to be achieved:

- where possible, employees have control over their pace of work

- employees are encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work

- where possible, employees are encouraged to develop new skills to help them undertake new and challenging pieces of work

- the organisation encourages employees to develop their skills

- employees have a say over when breaks can be taken

- employees are consulted over their work patterns.

Management Standards: Support

Includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.

The Standard is that:

- employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors

- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/States to be achieved:

- the organisation has policies and procedures to adequately support employees

- systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to support their staff

- systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to support their colleagues

- employees know what support is available and how and when to access it

- employees know how to access the required resources to do their job

- employees receive regular and constructive feedback.

Management Standards: Relationships

Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

The Standard is that:

- employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours, e.g. bullying at work

- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/States to be achieved:

- the organisation promotes positive behaviours at work to avoid conflict and ensure fairness

- employees share information relevant to their work

- the organisation has agreed policies and procedures to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour

- systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour

- systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to report unacceptable behaviour.

Management Standards: Role

Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles.

The Standard is that:

- employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities; and

- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/States to be achieved:

- the organisation ensures that, as far as possible, the different requirements it places upon employees are compatible

- the organisation provides information to enable employees to understand their role and responsibilities

- the organisation ensures that, as far as possible, the requirements it places upon employees are clear

- systems are in place to enable employees to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities.

Management Standards: Change

How organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

The Standard is that:

- employees indicate that the organisation engages them frequently when undergoing an organisational change

- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/States to be achieved:

- the organisation provides employees with timely information to enable them to understand the reasons for proposed changes

- the organisation ensures adequate employee consultation on changes and provides opportunities for employees to influence proposals

- employees are aware of the probable impact of any changes to their jobs. If necessary, employees are given training to support any changes in their jobs

- employees are aware of timetables for changes

- employees have access to relevant support during changes.

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