

STRESS & ANXIETY AT WORK

RECOGNISING STRESS AND ANXIETY AT WORK

Identifying early warning signs before they become
overwhelming

ARTICLE 2 • BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



Recognising Stress and Anxiety at Work

Identifying early warning signs before they become overwhelming

Stress and anxiety are among the most common mental health challenges experienced in the workplace. While occasional stress is a normal response to demanding situations, ongoing stress or persistent anxiety can affect physical health, emotional wellbeing, relationships and work performance. Left unrecognised, these experiences may gradually develop into burnout, prolonged sickness absence or more significant mental health difficulties.

One of the biggest challenges is that stress and anxiety often develop gradually. Many people become so accustomed to feeling under pressure that they begin to view it as normal. They may continue working through exhaustion, dismiss physical symptoms or ignore emotional changes, believing they simply need to "push through."

Recognising the early warning signs allows individuals and organisations to respond before problems escalate. Early intervention not only supports wellbeing but can also improve productivity, reduce sickness absence and create healthier workplaces.

It is important to remember that everyone experiences stress and anxiety differently. There is no single set of symptoms, and what feels manageable for one person may feel overwhelming for another. Awareness, rather than comparison, is the key to recognising when support may be needed.

Understanding Stress and Anxiety

Although stress and anxiety are closely linked, they are not the same.

Stress is typically a response to external pressures such as deadlines, increased workload, organisational change or conflict.

Anxiety is characterised by persistent feelings of worry, fear or apprehension that may continue even when no immediate threat is present.

Someone may experience:

- Stress without anxiety.

Anxiety without significant workplace stress.

Both stress and anxiety at the same time.

Recognising the difference helps ensure the most appropriate support is provided.

Why Early Recognition Matters

Stress and anxiety rarely appear suddenly.

Instead, they often develop gradually through small changes in:

- Mood.

Behaviour.

Thinking.

Physical health.

Relationships.

Performance.

Recognising these changes early provides opportunities to:

- Reduce stressors.

Access support.

Review workload.

Introduce healthy coping strategies.

Prevent burnout.

Ignoring early signs often allows problems to become more difficult to manage.

Physical Signs of Stress and Anxiety

Stress affects the entire body.

Common physical signs include:

- Headaches.

Muscle tension.

Neck or shoulder pain.

Fatigue.

Poor sleep.

Frequent waking.

Upset stomach.

Digestive problems.

Increased heart rate.

Shallow breathing.

Sweating.

Changes in appetite.

Frequent illness.

Persistent physical symptoms should never be ignored, particularly if they continue despite rest.

Emotional Signs

Stress and anxiety can significantly affect emotional wellbeing.

People may notice:

- Irritability.

Feeling overwhelmed.

Tearfulness.

Frustration.

Increased sensitivity.

Feeling emotionally exhausted.

Low mood.

Loss of confidence.

Feeling detached.

Difficulty relaxing.

Some individuals become quieter and withdrawn, while others become more reactive.

Cognitive Signs

Stress also affects the way we think.

Common cognitive signs include:

- Difficulty concentrating.

Forgetfulness.

Racing thoughts.

Constant worrying.

Difficulty making decisions.

Reduced creativity.

Feeling mentally "foggy."

Negative thinking.

Difficulty retaining information.

Tasks that once felt straightforward may suddenly feel much more demanding.

Behavioural Signs

Changes in behaviour often provide important clues that stress is increasing.

Examples include:

- Working longer hours.

Avoiding difficult tasks.

Increased mistakes.

Missing deadlines.

Withdrawal from colleagues.

Increased conflict.

Reduced motivation.

Absenteeism.

Presenteeism (coming to work while unwell).

Increased reliance on caffeine, alcohol or other unhealthy coping strategies.

Behavioural changes often develop gradually and may initially go unnoticed.

Stress and Relationships at Work

Stress can influence workplace relationships.

Someone experiencing significant stress may:

- Become less patient.

Avoid conversations.

Misinterpret communication.

Feel criticised more easily.

Withdraw socially.

Find teamwork more difficult.

Struggle to resolve conflict calmly.

Recognising that stress influences behaviour encourages compassion rather than judgement.

Recognising Stress in Colleagues

Managers and colleagues may notice changes before the individual recognises them.

Possible signs include:

- Changes in mood.

Reduced confidence.

Increased errors.

Appearing distracted.

Missing meetings.

Reduced engagement.

Increased sickness absence.

Becoming unusually quiet or unusually reactive.

It is important not to make assumptions but to approach conversations with empathy and curiosity.

Common Workplace Stressors

Workplace stress may arise from many different factors.

Examples include:

- Excessive workload.

Unrealistic deadlines.

Lack of control.

Poor communication.

Unclear expectations.

Organisational change.

Conflict.

Bullying or harassment.

Lack of recognition.

Job insecurity.

Poor work-life balance.

Understanding workplace stressors allows organisations to focus on prevention rather than simply managing the consequences.

Anxiety in the Workplace

Workplace anxiety may involve:

- Constant worrying about performance.

Fear of making mistakes.

Overthinking conversations.

Difficulty speaking in meetings.

Avoiding certain tasks.

Seeking excessive reassurance.

Feeling tense throughout the day.

Struggling to switch off after work.

Anxiety often persists beyond the immediate workplace and may continue during evenings, weekends or holidays.

When Stress Becomes Burnout

If prolonged stress remains unmanaged, burnout may develop.

Signs include:

- Chronic exhaustion.

Emotional numbness.

Reduced motivation.

Feeling detached from work.

Increased cynicism.

Declining performance.

Feeling unable to cope.

Burnout usually develops over time and often requires more than a short break to recover.

What Individuals Can Do

If you recognise signs of stress or anxiety, consider:

- Speaking to your manager.

Reviewing your workload.

Taking regular breaks.

Prioritising sleep.

Staying physically active.

Maintaining healthy boundaries.

Seeking support from trusted colleagues.

Accessing professional support if needed.

Early action often prevents difficulties from escalating.

What Employers Can Do

Organisations can support employees by:

- Encouraging open conversations.

Providing mental health training.

Reviewing workloads.

Promoting flexible working where possible.

Creating psychologically safe workplaces.

Offering Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs).

Encouraging regular wellbeing check-ins.

Responding early to concerns.

Healthy workplaces recognise that supporting wellbeing is an investment rather than a cost.

Key Takeaways

Stress and anxiety often develop gradually rather than appearing suddenly.

Physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural changes may all be early warning signs.

Recognising stress early allows timely intervention and reduces the risk of burnout.

Workplace relationships and performance may change when stress increases.

Managers and colleagues should approach concerns with empathy rather than assumptions.

Individuals and organisations both play important roles in supporting workplace wellbeing.

Early conversations can prevent small concerns from becoming significant mental health difficulties.

Final Thoughts

Stress and anxiety are common experiences in modern workplaces, but they should never be accepted as an unavoidable part of working life. Recognising the early warning signs allows individuals to seek support before stress begins affecting their health, relationships and performance. Equally, organisations that encourage open conversations about mental wellbeing create environments where employees feel safe to speak up without fear of judgement.

By paying attention to changes in physical health, emotions, thinking and behaviour, we become better equipped to respond with compassion rather than criticism. Early recognition is not about labelling people—it is about understanding when someone may need additional support.

Ultimately, healthier workplaces are created when stress is recognised early, conversations are encouraged and wellbeing is viewed as a shared responsibility. Prevention will always be more effective than waiting until someone reaches the point of burnout.