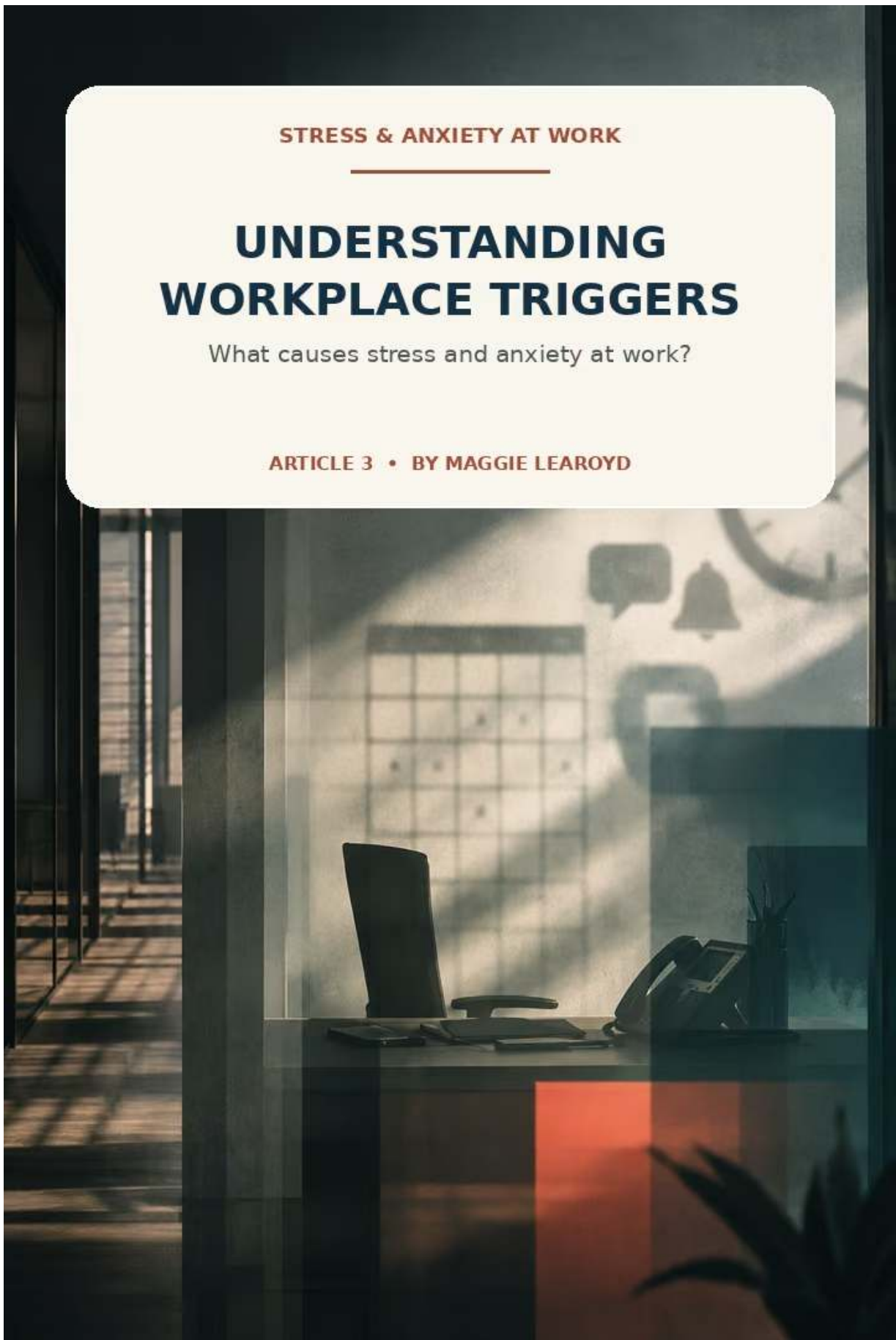


STRESS & ANXIETY AT WORK

UNDERSTANDING WORKPLACE TRIGGERS

What causes stress and anxiety at work?

ARTICLE 3 • BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



Understanding Workplace Triggers

What causes stress and anxiety at work?

Stress and anxiety rarely arise from a single event. More often, they develop through a combination of workplace pressures, personal circumstances and organisational factors that build over time. While some level of pressure can motivate people to perform well, excessive or prolonged pressure without adequate support can negatively affect both mental and physical health.

Understanding workplace triggers is an important step in preventing stress rather than simply reacting to it. Every employee will experience stress differently. What one person finds energising, another may find overwhelming. Factors such as personality, previous experiences, coping strategies, neurodiversity and life outside work all influence how workplace demands are experienced.

Creating healthier workplaces means recognising that stress is not simply an individual issue. Organisational culture, leadership, communication and workload all play a significant role in either increasing or reducing workplace stress. By identifying common triggers, employers and employees can work together to create environments that promote wellbeing, resilience and sustainable performance.

What Is a Workplace Trigger?

A workplace trigger is any situation, demand or experience that increases feelings of stress or anxiety.

Triggers may be:

- Short-term.

Ongoing.

Predictable.

Unexpected.

Organisational.

Interpersonal.

Environmental.

Personal.

Not every trigger affects everyone equally. Understanding individual differences is essential when supporting workplace wellbeing.

Excessive Workload

One of the most common causes of workplace stress is an excessive workload.

Employees may experience stress when they are expected to:

- Meet unrealistic deadlines.

Complete multiple high-priority tasks simultaneously.

Work long hours.

Regularly work through breaks.

Manage increasing responsibilities without additional support.

While occasional busy periods are normal, consistently excessive workloads increase the risk of fatigue, mistakes and burnout.

Healthy organisations regularly review workloads rather than assuming employees will simply "cope."

Lack of Control

People generally cope better with pressure when they feel they have some control over their work.

Stress may increase when employees have little influence over:

- Their workload.

Working hours.

Priorities.

Decision-making.

Methods of working.

Feeling powerless can contribute to frustration, anxiety and reduced job satisfaction.

Giving employees appropriate autonomy often improves both wellbeing and performance.

Unclear Expectations

Uncertainty creates anxiety.

Employees are more likely to experience stress when:

- Job roles are unclear.

Expectations frequently change.

Priorities are inconsistent.

Feedback is limited.

Success measures are poorly defined.

Clear communication reduces confusion and helps employees feel more confident in their role.

Poor Communication

Communication problems are a significant source of workplace stress.

Examples include:

- Conflicting instructions.

Lack of information.

Last-minute changes.

Inconsistent messages.

Poor feedback.

Limited opportunities to ask questions.

Employees who understand what is expected of them generally feel more confident and less anxious.

Workplace Relationships

Healthy relationships contribute to positive wellbeing.

However, stress may increase through:

- Conflict.

Bullying.

Harassment.

Poor teamwork.

Lack of support.

Feeling isolated.

Difficult relationships with managers.

Feeling psychologically safe is essential for both wellbeing and performance.

Organisational Change

Change is a normal part of working life.

However, uncertainty surrounding change can create significant anxiety.

Examples include:

- Restructuring.

New management.

Redundancies.

Mergers.

Technology changes.

New responsibilities.

Even positive changes may feel stressful if communication is limited.

Supporting employees through change requires openness, honesty and regular communication.

Job Insecurity

Concerns about employment can significantly affect mental wellbeing.

Employees may worry about:

- Redundancy.

Financial security.

Contract changes.

Organisational restructuring.

Performance expectations.

Uncertainty often increases anxiety, particularly when information is limited.

Transparent communication helps reduce unnecessary worry.

High Responsibility Roles

Some professions naturally involve greater responsibility.

Examples include:

- Healthcare.

Emergency services.

Education.

Social care.

Leadership positions.

Financial services.

Making decisions that affect other people's safety, wellbeing or finances can create sustained pressure.

Regular supervision and emotional support are particularly important in these roles.

Perfectionism

Some employees place exceptionally high expectations on themselves.

Perfectionism may involve:

- Fear of making mistakes.

Overworking.

Difficulty delegating.

Constant self-criticism.

Spending excessive time on tasks.

Feeling that work is "never good enough."

Although perfectionism may appear productive, it often contributes to chronic stress and anxiety.

Technology and Constant Availability

Modern technology has transformed how we work.

While it offers flexibility, it can also create pressure to remain constantly available.

Examples include:

- Responding to emails outside working hours.

Checking messages during holidays.

Feeling unable to disconnect.

Frequent notifications.

Virtual meeting fatigue.

Healthy boundaries between work and personal life are essential for recovery.

The Physical Work Environment

The workplace itself can influence stress levels.

Environmental factors include:

- Noise.

Poor lighting.

Lack of privacy.

Uncomfortable workstations.

Overcrowding.

Poor ventilation.

Frequent interruptions.

Creating comfortable working environments supports concentration and wellbeing.

Work-Life Balance

Balancing work alongside family responsibilities, caring roles, education or health needs can increase stress.

Employees may struggle when:

- Working hours are inflexible.

Overtime becomes expected.

Personal responsibilities are overlooked.

Recovery time is limited.

Supporting work-life balance benefits both employees and organisations.

Individual Differences

Not everyone responds to the same workplace demands in the same way.

Stress may be influenced by:

- Personality.

Previous life experiences.

Physical health.

Mental health.

Neurodiversity.

Confidence.

Coping strategies.

Support networks.

Understanding these differences encourages a more compassionate and individualised approach.

Recognising Multiple Triggers

Stress often develops through the interaction of several factors rather than a single event.

For example:

- An employee may be experiencing:

High workload.

Poor sleep.

Caring responsibilities.

Organisational change.

Financial worries.

Each factor alone may be manageable.

Together, they can become overwhelming.

Looking at the bigger picture helps identify where support may be most effective.

Preventing Workplace Stress

Organisations can reduce workplace triggers by:

- Reviewing workloads regularly.

Improving communication.

Providing supportive leadership.

Encouraging flexible working.

Promoting psychological safety.

Offering wellbeing support.

Consulting employees during change.

Encouraging healthy boundaries.

Prevention is always more effective than waiting until employees become unwell.

Key Takeaways

Workplace stress usually develops through multiple interacting factors.

Common triggers include excessive workload, poor communication, conflict and uncertainty.

Organisational culture plays a significant role in employee wellbeing.

Individual differences influence how workplace pressures are experienced.

Recognising stress triggers early supports prevention.

Employers and employees share responsibility for creating healthier workplaces.

Reducing workplace stress improves both wellbeing and organisational performance.

Final Thoughts

Stress and anxiety are rarely caused by weakness or an inability to cope. More often, they arise when workplace demands consistently exceed the resources, support or control available to an individual. Understanding the common triggers of workplace stress allows organisations to shift from reacting to problems towards preventing them in the first place.

Healthy workplaces recognise that wellbeing is shaped by workload, leadership, communication, relationships and organisational culture. By addressing these factors proactively, employers can reduce unnecessary pressure while creating environments where employees feel supported, valued and able to perform at their best.

Ultimately, recognising workplace triggers is not about eliminating all pressure—it is about ensuring that challenges remain manageable, support is available when needed and employees have the opportunity to thrive rather than simply survive at work.