

Mental Health & Wellbeing Policy

1. Policy Statement

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service Health and Social Care Trust (NIAS) acknowledge that stress exists in the workplace and that a psychologically healthy workforce when combined with a supportive work environment will benefit staff and employers alike.

NIAS is required, under the Health and Safety at Work (NI) Order 1978, to take whatever steps are reasonably practical to prevent employees becoming ill because of work. Whilst the scope of this policy is to cover workplace stress, the Trust recognises that sources external to the workplace may be significant in causing stress for people. When identifying and dealing with stress, the Trust will endeavour, if the individual is willing, to discuss these issues.

This policy is not a stand-alone document and will be used in conjunction with the Trust's existing policies and measures relating to Health and Safety, Attendance, Equal Opportunities, Harassment, Disciplinary, Grievance, Code of Conduct and the employee's professional Governing Body.

Employees have a responsibility to co-operate with the implementation of the stress management policy.

2. Definition of stress at work

Stress is defined by Health and Safety Executive as “***the reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed upon them***”. NIAS recognises that while providing a stimulating and motivating environment it must so far as reasonably practicable avoid harmful levels of stress as these can in extreme circumstances result in serious injury.

Stress in the workplace, as well as affecting the health of the employee, can also result in an increase in unhealthy behaviour (i.e. smoking and drinking), increased levels of sickness, an increase in workload/pressure for the remaining workforce, reduction in

staff morale, reduction in performance, high staff turnover, high levels of grievance cases, an increase in accident rates and lack of communication amongst other issues.

3. Possible symptoms and causes of stress

It must be realised that stress is not a sign of weakness. It can affect anyone, at any stage in their life in any position. No one is immune to stress. It is important however that you are able to recognise the cause of excessive stress so that they can be minimised or avoided completely. There will be occasions where the source of the problem is wholly unavoidable and it is in these circumstances that careful management will be necessary to avoid staff becoming unwell. A list of possible symptoms (stress indicators) as well as causes (stressors) are listed in Appendix I.

4. Aims and Objectives

The aims of the policy are to:

- Acknowledge that stress exists within the workplace.
- Increase general awareness of the issue of stress legitimising it as an issue which requires openness and understanding of both the employee and the organisation as a whole.
- Create and highlight the methods available to combat stress and its damaging effects (advice/guidance and counselling) as well as promoting a clear framework within which complaints about stress can be released and addressed.
- To take action to identify and eliminate or reduce workplace stressors accepting that the effect will be different as to the people involved and over time.
- Provide Managers with the necessary training in the recognition of the issue of stress in the workplace and ensure that appropriate systems are in place for dealing with complaints or the management of issues raised by stress ill health
- Encourage employees to seek help at as early a stage as possible. If they feel pressurised or if an employee has had previous health problems that they are encouraged to speak to managers about this. Early identification of problems will result in an effective and efficient resolution of a stressful situation.
- To protect employees with previous ill health ensuring that they are not discriminated against because of their difficulties and are given the necessary support available.

5. NIAS Responsibilities

The Chief Executive has overall responsibility to ensure that issues involving stress are managed and dealt with appropriately. This duty is delegated to the director of Human Resources.

6. Management Responsibilities

To ensure that:

- Each member of staff is clear about their individual roles and responsibilities within their own department as well as the organisation as a whole.
- Each individual member of staff is competent and comfortable doing their job by providing adequate resources, support and training.
- Stress risk assessments are carried out within their departments and that suitable control measures are in place for all stressors identified. These stress risk assessments must be monitored continually with appropriate action being taken when new or additional stress indicators are identified.
- To investigate all reports of stress within the agreed timescale in conjunction with the Human Resources Department and to institute all reasonably practicable steps required to rectify the situation.

7. Employee Responsibilities

It must be emphasized that maintaining a healthy workforce is not only the responsibility of the Trust; it also lies with the individual to take appropriate steps to alleviate the causes of stress if they are within their control.

Individual members of staff have a duty to take responsible care both of their own health and general fitness and of the health and welfare of others who could be affected by their actions. Ways of dealing with everyday stress are highlighted in Appendix II

- Should you find that you are experiencing stress or are struggling to cope with work based duties or external factors, you are strongly urged that you discuss this with your line manager.
- If you find approaching or discussing these issues with your line manager difficult for any reason you can approach either a more senior manager or seek assistance from one of the support services referred to below. All employees

must realise they have a responsibility to work in partnership with those offering advice/support or assistance.

8. Types of support available

Counselling Service: NIAS has access to an independent counselling service which can be contacted confidentially on **0500 127 079**

Human Resources: Human Resources staff are available for individual confidential consultation if you wish to discuss any issues relating to the policy or your post.

9. Pro-active Controls

Departmental inductions: Each new member of staff or existing member of staff who is transferred and /or promoted will be given a departmental induction by their supervisor this induction will address the following issues.

- Departmental structure
- The individual's own role
- Relevant information sources.

During induction staff will also receive training in all relevant procedures and agree a plan to eliminate any skills gaps.

Team Meetings: Those supervising staff will hold regular meetings with those who report directly to them to discuss work related issues examples of which would include:

- Workload including covering holidays etc.
- New projects.
- Skills shortages.
- Changes in working practices
- Departmental aims and objectives
- Departmental relationships changes in structure etc.

Team members will formulate actions for the issues raised and assign responsibility for their completion.

Individual Meetings: Those supervising staff will ensure that all staff are consulted on and are aware of the departments arrangements for contact with supervisors i.e. open door policy, set times.

Staff Development: Attendance on relevant course may be helpful if you are experiencing work related stress. Some examples of applicable courses may be “Personal Effectiveness and Assertiveness”, “How to Manage and Deal with Difficult People”, “Time Management” and “Stress Management”.

10. Handling Individual Cases

Where an employee is experiencing stress within their job/organisation/home life they should contact their manager for support/advice.

The line manager in consultation with human resources will initiate an investigation into the possible causes of the work related problem. The results from this investigation will be used as a guide to decide if and where resources need to be directed as well as highlight what action needs to be taken to achieve stress prevention at work. Where possible, modifications will be made to the work situation if it is agreed by the employee, the line manager, occupational health advice and the Personnel Officer that work changes are required to relieve stress. Any changes will be documented in writing and will be monitored closely by the line manager over a specified period of time.

Where short term solutions fail to resolve the problem, other changes will be considered for example transference to a similar post without the stressful factor(s). This transfer will only be entered into by mutual agreement between both parties. The overall aim is to provide support and give help to the individual. However, where termination of contract due to sickness is necessary, all factors will be taken into account and will only be considered when all other rehabilitative efforts have failed. In this instance the Attendance Policy will be followed.

Returning to work after a stress-related absence requires careful thought and planning by all involved. It is important that the employee is well supported by all work colleagues and line managers upon return to work with a review of work performance carried out on a regular basis. This ongoing support may be particularly vital to certain employees in the early stages of their return to work.

A return to work interview will be carried out at this stage by the employee’s manager, as is normal procedure for any employee returning after sickness absence. This interview may be useful in determining if any modifications need to be made to the employee’s job. Follow up interviews will also aid their progress as will any liaison



between the employee, line manager and occupational health service individual, where required, to play a role in the person's return to work and future years productivity.

Further literature/information is available from the Human Resources Section. This policy will be regularly monitored and reviewed and any modifications made to ensure its continued effectiveness will be communicated to all employees within a reasonable period of time.

APPENDIX I – SYMPTOMS AND CAUSES OF STRESS

Possible Symptoms

There are various effects that stress can have on an individual, some of which can be recognised by fellow work colleagues and line managers. It is important to note however that recognition of any the following traits in yourself does not necessarily mean you are experiencing dangerous stress but recognition of the potential indicators may help you to avoid them.

Emotional Impact

- Increased levels of hostility, irritability, and anger leading to emotional outbursts.
- Feeling down or in a depressed state
- Frenetic rushing about trying to do various tasks and getting more and more flustered resulting in lack of productivity.
- Lack of confidence, constantly seeking reassurance from others.
- Total indifference of other's needs/wants.
- The inability to relax, to feel good or to switch off.
- Personality traits may change completely where a normally neat and tidy person may appear somewhat dishevelled and untidy.

Cognitive Impact

- Concentration difficulties, where your capacity for making decisions is reduced.
- Difficulty remembering details and items.
- Unable to switch off.
- Responses erratic and impulsive.
- Mistakes and errors more frequent and judgement impaired.

Physical Impact

- Might become more difficult to get to sleep at night or stay asleep for more than a few hours. Indigestion, heartburn, palpitations, dizziness, sweating, dry mouth, headaches, overeating/loss of appetite.

- Might find yourself drinking more caffeine/nicotine /alcohol.
- May lose interest in normal hobbies and external interests.

Sometimes stress may be temporary and brought on by circumstantial reasons like starting a new job or family sickness. At other times it can be cumulative, building up over a period of time with constant work pressure and family worries of a more serious nature.

Possible Causes

Different causes of stress exist and can include:

Culture

- Lack of communication and consultation.
- A culture of blame when things go wrong.
- Denial of potential problems.
- Staff encouraged to work long hours and/or to take work home.

Demands

- Too much to do, too little time.
- Too little or too much training for the job.
- Boring or repetitive work, or too little to do.
- Unfair allocation of work.
- Unrealistic targets.
- Lack of supervision.
- Inadequate staffing levels.
- Risk of violence.
- Lack of feedback.

Control

- Low participation in decision making.
- Little influence on how work is organised.



Relationships

- Conflict between departments.
- Poor relationships with supervisors.
- Poor relationships with colleagues.
- Harassment/bullying.

Change

- Uncertainty about what is happening.
- Fears about job security.
- Introduction of new technology.
- Lack of training.

Role

- Staff unclear about work objectives.
- Staff feeling that the job requires them to behave in conflicting ways at the same time.
- Lack of clarity regarding role and responsibilities.

Support

- Lack of training.
- Lack of career progression.
- Colleagues not pulling their weight.

Outside work

- Moving house.
- Pregnancy.
- Retirement.
- Illness/injury.
- Working and studying.
- Money worries.

APPENDIX II – INDIVIDUAL STRESS AVOIDANCE TECHNIQUES

Find out what things help you relax and try to do them regularly.

Relax

- Have a bath.
- Borrow a relaxation tape from your local library.
- Recognise when you are tense and try and deal with the situation you are faced with.
- Take up yoga or a similar interest.
- Go for a walk/take some exercise.
- Make time for yourself.
- Listen to your favourite music.
- Laughter often relieves stress and tension.

Think positively

- We all make mistakes and we don't always get things right first.
- Ask for help if you need it.
- Try to co-operate with other colleagues, they may well be feeling the pressure too.
- Listen to colleagues' opinions and negotiate a compromise.

Plan

- Plan ahead if you can and put tasks in order of priority.
- Write down all the things you are worried about, they are often not quite as bad as previously thought.
- Make lists and put them where you can find them.
- Set realistic achievable goals for yourself and reward yourself when you have achieved them.



Diet

- A balanced diet and regular meals will help you to cope with stress.

Exercise

- Exercise regularly – the feel good factor – there is evidence that this is a major help in dealing with stress. If exercise is undertaken it can take three to four weeks before it is enjoyed so persevere.
- Also remember, if you are feeling stressors are becoming overwhelming, there is a confidential free-phone telephone number to discuss any problems you may be facing.