

Stress is a significant health and safety hazard in workplaces across the UK, affecting employees' wellbeing and productivity. For employers, understanding how to identify, assess, and manage work-related stress is not just good practice—it's a legal duty under the **Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974**. One of the most practical ways to do this is by referencing the **Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Management Standards**, which identify six key areas of work design that can lead to stress if not properly managed: *demands, control, support, relationships, role, and change*.

This blog post will break down these six stress areas, explain why they matter as potential stress hazards, and outline your employer's duties under UK law, including the HSE stress risk assessment approach and how the **Equality Act 2010** fits in when stress becomes a disability issue. Plus, we'll finish with handy tips on sharing this info across popular platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), TikTok, YouTube, Telegram, Viber, and Pinterest—so you can get the message out!

Why Stress is a Workplace Health and Safety Hazard

Workplace stress isn't just feeling overwhelmed or busy at times. It becomes a harmful health and safety issue when work demands consistently exceed an employee's ability to cope, leading to mental ill health, physical symptoms, and reduced ability to do their job safely.

Under the **Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974** (HSWA), employers have the legal duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety, and welfare at work of their employees. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require employers to assess risks, including psychosocial risks like stress.

The HSE's **Management Standards** provide a clear framework to help employers spot the root causes of work-related stress and manage them effectively — rather than treating stress as a vague personal resilience issue or simply 'encouraging wellbeing' with no proper risk assessment.

The Six Stress Areas According to HSE Management Standards

The HSE Management Standards define six core areas of work design that can lead to stress. These are:

1. **Demands**
2. **Control**
3. **Support**
4. **Relationships**
5. **Role**
6. **Change**

1. Demands

This relates to workload, work patterns, and the work environment.

- Are employees given enough work to do, and is it achievable within working hours?
- Is the work physically demanding or mentally taxing beyond reasonable expectations?
- Are there unrealistic deadlines or conflicting demands?
- Is the environment safe and comfortable (noise, temperature, ergonomics)?

If demands consistently exceed employee capacity, stress levels rise.

2. Control

This area focuses on the level of autonomy workers have over how they do their jobs.

- Can employees influence the pace of their work and how it's done?
- Do they have input into decisions affecting their job?
- Is there flexibility in working hours or methods?

Low control has been repeatedly linked to increased stress and poorer health outcomes. Simply telling someone to 'keep calm' won't fix control deficits.

3. Support

Support covers the assistance and resources provided by the organisation, managers, and colleagues.

- Is there a clear support system when someone is struggling?
- Are managers approachable and trained on how to deal with stress?
- Is there access to appropriate resources or employee assistance programmes?
- Is support available at all levels, including peer support?

Lack of support can leave employees isolated and increase the risk of burnout and mental health issues.

4. Relationships

This area concerns the quality of interactions among employees and managers.

- Is there a positive culture encouraging respect and civility?
- Are incidents of bullying, harassment, or conflict dealt with promptly and effectively?
- Are communication channels clear and respectful?

Negative workplace relationships contribute heavily to stress risk and degrade wellbeing.

5. Role

This considers whether employees understand their role within the organisation and whether there is clarity or conflict.

- Do employees know what is expected of them?
- Are responsibilities clearly defined and communicated?
- Are there conflicting demands or ambiguity in role boundaries?

Role ambiguity or conflict can create confusion and stress, undermining engagement and performance.

6. Change

This focuses on how organisational change is managed and communicated.

- Are employees informed, consulted, and supported during change?
- Are changes planned and implemented with clear explanations of expected impact?
- Is uncertainty minimised, and support offered during transitions?

Poorly managed change is a major cause of workplace stress.

How Employers Must Use These Stress Areas: The HSE Stress Risk Assessment

Under the **Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999**, employers must carry out risk assessments for all significant workplace hazards, stress included. The HSE provides free guidance and tools to conduct a stress risk assessment based on these six areas.

An effective risk assessment will:

1. Identify which of the six stress areas are problematic in your workplace.
2. Gather evidence using employee surveys, absence data, sickness records or focus groups.
3. Involve employees and managers to pinpoint stressors.
4. Implement control measures to address issues, e.g., workload adjustments, manager training, conflict resolution, clearer roles.
5. Review and monitor to check if improvements reduce stress-related harm.

Simply advising staff to 'cope better' or offering generic wellbeing workshops won't meet your legal duty. You must manage stress risks systematically, treating them as health and safety hazards.

Stress, Disability, and the Equality Act 2010

Sometimes, work stress leads to or worsens conditions classed as disabilities under the **Equality Act 2010**. This includes mental health conditions that have a substantial and long-term adverse effect on normal day-to-day activities.

If an employee's stress-related condition qualifies as a disability, the employer has additional duties to make reasonable adjustments.

- This could include workload changes, flexible working, or additional support.
- Failure to accommodate a disability linked to work stress can be unlawful discrimination.

Therefore, spotting the six stress areas and acting early can prevent issues escalating into disability discrimination claims.



Summary Table: The Six Stress Areas and Key Action Points

Stress Area	What to Look For	Example	Action
Demands	Excessive workload; unrealistic deadlines; poor environment	Adjust targets; improve work-rest balance; fix environment issues	Control
Control	Low employee autonomy; lack of decision-making input	Increase autonomy; involve staff in planning; flexible working	Support
Support	Poor management support; lack of peer or organisational assistance	Train managers; establish support networks; offer resources	Relationships
Relationships	Bullying, harassment, conflict, poor communication	Zero tolerance policies; mediation; improve communication	Role
Role	Role ambiguity; conflicting responsibilities	Clarify job descriptions; improve role communication	Change
Change	Poorly managed organisational changes; lack of communication	Plan and communicate changes early; support staff through change	

How to Share This Knowledge: Handy Social Media Tools

If you're a manager, HR generalist, or wellbeing champion in [how to request reasonable adjustments](#) a small or micro workplace without a dedicated HR department, sharing awareness about these stress areas is key. Many staff trust peer-to-peer messaging and social media channels:

- **WhatsApp:** Share a short summary or a link to the HSE Management Standards. Quick and informal.
- **Facebook:** Post an article or infographic in your workplace group to encourage discussion.
- **Instagram:** Use visuals or carousel posts to explain each stress area creatively.
- **TikTok:** Create short videos highlighting signs of stress and how to spot these six areas.
- **Twitter/X:** Share quick facts, tips, and links to resources using relevant hashtags like #HSEStressStandards.
- **YouTube:** Upload detailed explainer videos or use existing HSE resources to educate your team.
- **Telegram & Viber:** Use these secure messaging apps for private staff groups to share confidential information or quick updates.
- **Pinterest:** Pin infographics, checklist templates, and posters about stress risk assessment and support.

Integrating stress risk awareness into your daily communication can gradually shift workplace culture towards risk management and genuine wellbeing.

Final Thoughts

Stress at work is a real health and safety hazard, not just a personal resilience issue. The six stress areas—*demands, control, support, relationships, role, and change*—are a practical, evidence-based framework to identify where stress risks arise. These areas underpin the **HSE Management Standards**, which serve as an essential benchmark for employers to meet their legal duties under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

Don't let stress be ignored or reduced to vague wellbeing talk. Use these six areas as a checklist to guide effective stress risk assessments, controls, and, when necessary, reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010.

And remember — in small businesses without HR, this responsibility often lands on one manager's shoulders. Keep a handy checklist of these stress areas, use the HSE risk assessment tools, and share clear info with your team across the communication channels they use every day.

For more detailed guidance, visit the [HSE Management Standards for Work-Related Stress](#).



Share This Post

If you found this post useful, share it on your favourite platforms:

- WhatsApp
- Facebook
- Instagram (share visually)
- Twitter/X
- TikTok (upload your own clip)
- YouTube (share an explainer video)
- Telegram
- Viber
- Pinterest