

Focus on stress and burnout

Every year, hundreds of thousands of workers suffer from stress-related illnesses linked to their work and the Covid pandemic has increased the strain for many. We look at why stress is a trade union issue and how PCS can help

According to the Health and Safety Executive, [in the UK in 2019/20](#) there were an estimated **828,000** workers affected by work-related stress, depression, or anxiety. And work-related stress, anxiety and depression was the cause of **51%** of all work-related ill health.

[Recent research in the UK found that the situation has worsened during the pandemic with 92%](#) of GPs reporting a rise in patients seeking help for work-related stress since the onset of Covid, with **68%** experiencing increases in the last 3 months. Financial insecurity, pressures to return to the workplace and increasing workloads are among the reasons cited as factors increasing anxiety.

The survey also found that young people have been hit hard by the crisis with two-thirds of GPs reporting an increase in 16-24-year-olds seeking support. Many workers have found their sleep and diet have been affected and have also increased their alcohol consumption.

Even before the pandemic, in [a TUC survey of health and safety reps](#) **70%** identified stress as one of the top 5 hazards in their workplace, the most frequent issue identified, and **32%** said it was the top hazard. In the public sector the figure was higher with **78%** of reps saying that it was one of the top 5 hazards.

Stress can hit anyone and is not confined to sectors, jobs, or industries. Stress affects people differently. What one person finds stressful might not affect another.

Members and reps can read more about [stress and find guidance](#) on PCS Knowledge.

What are the signs?

The symptoms of stress include anxiety and depression but can range from sleeplessness and listlessness through to clinical depression and suicide. The

physical effects range from loss of appetite and nausea through to heart damage and stroke.

A workplace with a lot of stress may have high absenteeism, higher risk of accidents, industrial relations problems, demotivation, and high labour turnover.

There are 6 main areas at work which can affect stress levels:

- Demands
- Control
- Support
- Relationships
- Role
- Change.

Employers should assess the risks in these areas to manage stress in the workplace.

A change in the way someone thinks or feels can also be a sign of stress, for example, they may have mood swings, become withdrawn, lose motivation, commitment, and confidence. They can also be more tearful, sensitive, or aggressive.

Work-related stress may trigger an existing mental or physical health problem that the person may otherwise have successfully managed without letting it affect their work.

Getting help

The earlier a problem is tackled the less impact it will have. If you think a colleague is having problems, encourage them to talk to their PCS union rep, whose details they can find by [logging into PCS Digital](#).

If you have concerns about workplace stress, talk to your union health and safety rep who engages with your employer about stress at work. They ensure that stress hazards are included in risk assessments, that all managers are trained, that an employer has a clear policy about preventing and dealing with work-related stress and that the grievance procedure process supports workers who are being harmed.

Health and safety reps also help raise awareness by promoting events like **National Stress Awareness Day on 3 November** and offering training.

[Use the stress checklist for PCS reps](#) on PCS Knowledge.

You don't have to suffer stress and we can help. Stress is not a weakness. Getting help with stress is a powerful step and will help you take back control.

Help beat stress where you work, [get active in PCS](#) and help to organise your workplace, and if you're not a member [join online today](#).

[Read members' experience of stress and burnout](#)

'Sometimes I get snappy and tearful'

"I'm in my 20s and this is my first civil service job. I've been working from home since lockdown began.

My job is stressful anyway – as many people's jobs are. There is huge ministerial interest in our team's work.

When Covid kicked off there was a rush of important, urgent work that needed to be done. The civil service responded brilliantly. But I have noticed that ministers started to expect that as the norm. They think we should work like that all the time – you can, but you end up with loads of burned out staff breaking their necks to get things done.

A lot of the team has been struggling to cope. When you add working from home into the mix, I often feel very isolated. You meet on Teams and then when you hang up there's just this enormous pile of work and competing priorities, and you're sitting in your living room stressed out of your head.

Often there is just so much to do that I end up not doing any of it because I'm so overwhelmed and don't know where to start. I'm not sure if that's normal.

I've been finding it difficult to sleep because I'm thinking about the next day at work. Some days I get really upset because I feel like there's not enough support. I get snappy with my partner and a bit tearful sometimes.

I'm just completely drained and dreading logging on the next day. I didn't realise that's how I was feeling until other people started to go off sick.

Maybe it sounds bad but what I'm trying to do now is just the bare minimum and not break my neck, because as soon as you help one person out everyone starts asking.

To deal with it all, initially I started drinking at weekends, then realised that's not great. I have started going to the gym more again. I'm the sort of person who likes routines and Covid has not helped with that. I am actually looking forward to going back to the office.

Sometimes I feel guilty that I am feeling burned out when I'm so young. Others might look down on someone younger who says that; maybe they feel they have been through a lot more than me. But everyone can experience it.

One thing I despise is when employers focus too much on mindfulness. I do practice it; I meditate and things like that, but I don't like it when they use it to pass on responsibility for our mental wellbeing. It's such an easy cop out for the employer to paper over the cracks."

'Work has just burnt me up and changed my outlook on life'

"I work in the DVLA. All of this started with the pandemic. A lot of people went off because they were isolating or shielding. I was a part-time carer for my parents, but I still kept going in. I couldn't see them. It annoyed me so much.

Some of the calls we were taking were horrendous. We deal with a lot of overseas customers. I remember being inundated with calls from Italian people – we had their passports (as ID for exchanging driving licences) and they wanted to go back home and bury their relatives. We couldn't locate the passports; we weren't allowed to as we didn't have the staff to look for them. The pressure was immense.

I just began dreading going into work. My job is to help people, and we can't.

It's even worse now because we have got such a huge backlog. You can imagine how frustrated people are.

I just know I'm going into work to get backlash. I used to love my job for the fast-paced environment and the fun. But it's relentless now. So many people who have been in work through the pandemic are now mentally struggling.

I spent this weekend in tears thinking about going into work on Monday, I didn't want to socialise or see anyone – you don't want to bring other people down.

I feel burned out. I can't concentrate. I can't sleep. I've had panic attacks.

Because I caught Covid [during an outbreak at work] I've got terrible brain fog. I'm terrified of making mistakes. But I know my job well.

I feel like my personality has changed from being upbeat with loads of energy, to lethargic and depressed. Work has just burnt me up and changed my outlook on life.

I feel like a battery that's been drained, and there's no charge going to come back in it, ever.

I did go on strike, I fully support the union in that. Management should have put us on rotation until this was over."

- **The interviewees spoke to PCS anonymously.**

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