

# Dealing with Stress

**Deborah Lawson**, General Secretary for Voice: The Union for Education Professionals, offers suggestions for recognising and tackling stress in the workplace.

Positive pressure can energise and help you reach your peak performance. Too much pressure, however, can leave you feeling stressed or anxious, and continued stress can impact on health.

Stress is a daily part of life and professionals working in the early years are no different. We enjoy working with, educating and caring for young children, and even though it is hard work and financial rewards are limited, job satisfaction levels are high.

Our passion to educate and do the best for children and future generations is what brought us into the profession and often what keeps us here. It is certainly the advantage of working with young children. The drawback is all the other work that goes with it.

At Voice, we know from our annual stress survey that it is the other demands placed on staff, rather than their role working with children, that is the issue and the biggest cause of stress in the profession.

This is further corroborated by the volume and nature of the calls we receive from our early years members, informing us of the demands made of them, and generally having to do more in less time with fewer resources, increasing the amount of unpaid work outside the

workplace. These demands are out of their control and often, but not always, driven by external factors, such as policy changes from government or Ofsted.

Voice is not alone in recognising the rise in stress-related issues. The Pre-school Learning Alliance report last year, *Minds Matter*, reported that 74 percent of those surveyed described themselves as stressed as a result of their job.

Similar statistics are reported by the Education Support Partnership. The Health and Safety Executive report on workplace stress, depression and anxiety found that workload, too much pressure or responsibility, was the biggest stress factor cited by most respondents. It is alarming to note that education and health/social care professionals also report higher levels of stress than other professions and occupations. This all seems to paint a rather gloomy picture, but it is possible to change the narrative by taking a proactive approach.

## Proactive approach

From a health and safety perspective, employers have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work. But tackling stress, minimising or preventing it, not only demonstrates

good employment practice, it has business benefits too.

Being proactive in tackling stress makes for a healthier, happier, more engaged staff team, reduces sickness absence and workplace disputes, and improves retention levels and recruitment – all of which contributes to the early education and care provided by you and your team.

So, prevention is better than cure, and there are a few simple but effective steps you can take – but first some clarification.

First, stress is not a mental health condition, but it can exacerbate any existing mental health condition or cause problems in future if not addressed. It is important, therefore, to be able to spot when staff may be experiencing stress.

Secondly, early years professionals are well known for putting the needs of children first, relegating their own needs to 'when I have time'. The profession needs to take the oxygen mask approach. Remember, in case of emergency, fit your own oxygen mask before, and in order to help, others. This is not a selfish approach, because it enables you to take control, something that is important especially if, because of a

stressful situation, you feel out of control and unable to do your best. The oxygen mask approach empowers and is an important step in managing stress.

Thirdly, employers and managers do have a duty of care and need to be equipped to recognise the early signs of stress – but so do employees. As with all health and safety matters, it is the duty of everyone in the workplace, but the legal responsibility to undertake a risk assessment is the employer's. When stress is recognised and tackled as a workplace issue, it can lead to collective solutions. So, employer and employees have responsibilities and the best way to fulfil them is together.

## Steps

The first step is to carry out a risk assessment to identify problems and what triggers them. Identification leads

to an action plan and the need for solutions. Collective solutions help ensure that all staff engage in the process, have ownership of the solutions and can be supportive of one another.

A whole team approach requires everyone to understand and recognise, in themselves and others, the symptoms of stress. These include low energy, headaches, dry mouth, apathy, upset stomach and nausea, aches, pains and tense muscles, tearfulness, chest pain and rapid heartbeat, insomnia, frequent colds and infections, and loss of sexual desire or ability.

Stress can affect us physically and often we only realise that we are stressed after feeling the physical signs like tiredness, headaches or an upset stomach.

Whilst there may be things in

life, in and outside of work, that cannot be controlled, there are ways to manage day-to-day feelings of stress.

By helping employees or colleagues to identify their triggers, consideration can be given to what can be changed to manage them.

A simple step can be effective. If you are overwhelmed by paperwork, take time to organise and plan the work, taking small steps to achieve long-term success. Finding time, even ten minutes, in a day for yourself can be hard, but consider it your oxygen mask and find time.

Support at work is important and several organisations have resources that can help. No one size fits all. What is important is to have a policy and mechanism to manage and prevent stress in your workplace.

---

## Useful Links

[The Education Support Partnership](#) provides support and advice for all staff working in schools, colleges and universities. Free helpline 08000 562 561.

[ACAS: Dealing with stress in the workplace.](#)

[Voice stress support](#): to access information about stress, managing stress and links to further tools and useful information.

The toolkits can be found on the latest [HSE stress bulletin](#)



After gaining her NNEB in 1977, **Deborah Lawson** worked with children with special needs and disabilities, as a Registration and Inspection Officer (daycare), as an Ofsted nursery education inspector, and as External Funding and Business Manager and Childcare Commissioning Manager in Gloucestershire. A member of Voice (previously PAT and PANN) since 1987, Deborah became a Council member in 1989 and, in 2006-2007, the first non-teacher National Chairman. She was elected General Secretary in 2012 and re-elected unopposed in 2017.