MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING FACTSHEET

Stress, Burnout and Overwhelm

Recognising prolonged pressure, understanding its causes and finding realistic support

The short version

Stress is a response to pressure. Short periods may help us act, but severe or prolonged stress can affect the body, mood, relationships and ability to function. Overwhelm often reflects demands exceeding the resources currently available. Occupational burnout specifically relates to chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.

Understanding the terms

Pressure	A demand or challenge requiring a response. Pressure is not automatically harmful and may be manageable when demands, time, control and resources are reasonably balanced.
Stress	The physical and psychological response that can occur when demands feel excessive, threatening or beyond our ability or resources to manage.
Overwhelm	The experience of having more demands, information, emotions or decisions than can be processed or managed at that moment. It is a description of experience, not a medical diagnosis.
Occupational burnout	WHO describes burnout as an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It involves exhaustion, increased mental distance or cynicism about the job, and reduced professional efficacy. WHO does not classify it as a medical condition.

An important distinction

The word burnout is commonly used for exhaustion caused by caring, parenting, illness or wider life pressures. Those experiences are real and deserve support, but the WHO definition applies specifically to work. A clinician may need to consider depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, anaemia, thyroid problems, chronic illness, medication effects or other causes of exhaustion.

How stress may show up

Body	Headaches, dizziness, muscle tension, pain, stomach symptoms, sweating, a racing heart, chest discomfort, disrupted sleep, exhaustion or sexual difficulties.
Thoughts	Constant worry, racing thoughts, forgetfulness, poor concentration, indecision, catastrophising or feeling unable to see a way forward.
Feelings	Irritability, anxiety, tearfulness, anger, hopelessness, numbness, loss of confidence or feeling trapped and overwhelmed.
Behaviour	Withdrawal, avoiding tasks, working longer, rushing, making mistakes, changes in eating or sleep, reduced self-care, or increased alcohol, nicotine, drugs or gambling.
Relationships and functioning	Conflict, reduced patience, missed commitments, reduced performance, sickness absence, difficulty caring for others or being unable to complete ordinary tasks.

Common sources of prolonged pressure

- unmanageable workload or conflicting demands
- caring, parenting or household responsibilities
- pain, disability, chronic illness or poor sleep
- bullying, discrimination or unsafe environments
- limited control, unclear expectations or constant change
- money worries, debt, insecure work or housing
- bereavement, relationship difficulties or loneliness
- lack of practical, emotional or organisational support

Stress is not always an individual problem

Breathing exercises, planning and relaxation can help regulate the stress response, but they cannot remove an unsafe workload, unaffordable housing, discrimination, inadequate care or financial insecurity. Effective support may require practical and organisational change.

Work-related stress and burnout

The Health and Safety Executive states that employers have a legal duty to protect workers from work-related stress by assessing the risk and acting on it. HSE identifies six areas of work design that can contribute to stress.

Demands	Workload, work patterns, deadlines and the physical working environment.
Control	How much say a person has over the way they carry out their work.
Support	Encouragement, information, training and resources provided by managers, colleagues and the organisation.
Relationships	Positive working, conflict, bullying, harassment and unacceptable behaviour.
Role	Whether responsibilities are clear and conflicting roles are avoided.
Change	How organisational changes are planned, managed and communicated.

What a supportive workplace should consider

- identify and reduce the sources of excessive workplace pressure
- involve employees and representatives in practical improvements
- provide compassionate, inclusive management and psychological safety
- consider adjustments to workload, intensity, hours, duties or working arrangements
- make occupational health, employee assistance or other support accessible where available
- avoid using individual resilience training as a replacement for organisational action

NICE recommends organisational approaches as the foundation for workplace mental wellbeing, followed by individual and targeted support. Confidentiality and its limits should be discussed clearly.

A realistic response to overwhelm

1. Pause and stabilise	If possible, stop adding new tasks. Sit somewhere safe, slow your breathing, drink water and allow the immediate stress response to settle before making major decisions.
2. Name the pressures	Write down what is demanding attention. Separate urgent safety or health needs from tasks that can wait, be reduced, delegated or stopped.
3. Reduce the load	Choose one next action. Ask for practical help, negotiate expectations, postpone non-essential work or break a task into smaller parts.
4. Restore basic needs	Support regular food, fluids, prescribed medicines, sleep and rest. Use movement only in a way that suits current health and ability.
5. Address the cause	Seek workplace, healthcare, financial, housing, relationship, safeguarding or social-care support according to what is driving the pressure.

Helpful tools - without self-blame

- a short written priority list
- problem-solving one issue at a time
- relaxation, grounding or paced breathing
- reducing alcohol or substances used to cope
- planned pauses and realistic boundaries
- talking with someone who can offer practical help
- sleep and recovery time where circumstances allow
- professional help when self-help is not enough

When to seek professional help

GP or NHS Talking Therapies	Seek help when stress is affecting daily life, symptoms are persistent or worsening, self-help is not working, or anxiety or low mood may also be present.
Physical symptoms	Do not automatically assume chest pain, breathlessness, dizziness, severe fatigue or other new symptoms are caused by stress. Obtain appropriate medical assessment.
Workplace support	Consider a manager, another manager, human resources, a trade union representative, occupational health or an employee assistance programme, depending on safety and availability.

Urgent help and emergencies

Call 999 or go to A&E now

Do this if someone's life is at risk, they have seriously harmed themselves or taken an overdose, or you do not feel able to keep yourself or someone else safe. A mental-health emergency should be treated as seriously as a physical emergency.

Urgent but not an emergency	Use NHS 111 online or call 111 and select the mental health option. You can also ask a GP practice for an urgent appointment.
Samaritans	Call 116 123 free, day or night, 365 days a year, if you need a safe place to talk about whatever you are facing.

How Health Matters UK can support you

Health Matters UK can help you identify sources of pressure, notice patterns, organise priorities and consider realistic wellbeing actions. We can help you prepare questions and signpost appropriate workplace, practical or healthcare support. We do not diagnose burnout or mental-health conditions, provide psychotherapy or crisis intervention, or replace a GP or regulated professional.

Your wellbeing matters to us

Overwhelm is not proof that you are weak or incapable. It may be a signal that the demands placed upon you have exceeded the time, energy, health, control or support currently available. Recovery often requires reducing pressure as well as strengthening support.

Important information

This factsheet is for general education and does not replace personalised medical advice, diagnosis, treatment, employment advice or a workplace risk assessment. Seek appropriate professional support when stress is affecting your health, work or safety. Use NHS 111 for urgent mental-health help and call 999 or go to A&E when life is at risk or someone cannot be kept safe.

Evidence and review

Prepared in line with Health Matters UK's Evidence & Editorial Standards. Information was checked against current NHS, WHO, HSE and NICE resources. External guidance remains the responsibility of the issuing organisation.

• NHS. Get help with stress, reviewed March 2026. nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/stress/

• NHS. Dealing with stress - Every Mind Matters. nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-health-issues/stress/

• World Health Organization. Burn-out an occupational phenomenon. who.int/standards/classifications/frequently-asked-questions/burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon

• Health and Safety Executive. Work-related stress and how to manage it. hse.gov.uk/stress/overview.htm

• Health and Safety Executive. Management Standards. hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/overview.htm

• NICE. Mental wellbeing at work (NG212). nice.org.uk/guidance/ng212

• NHS. Find NHS Talking Therapies for anxiety and depression. nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/find-nhs-talking-therapies-for-anxiety-and-depression/

• NHS. Where to get urgent help for mental health. nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/where-to-get-urgent-help-for-mental-health/

• Samaritans. Contact a Samaritan. samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/

Published: November 2026 Version: 1.0 Review due: November 2027, or sooner if guidance changes

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