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It's frustrating when you bring up work stress and your manager brushes it off by saying, "Stress is personal." If you're thinking, *but isn't stress a workplace issue?* — you're not wrong. Stress, especially work-related stress, is far from merely a "personal problem." It's a recognised workplace hazard with legal implications under UK health and safety law. This post will give you clear, actionable info to respond confidently and help your manager understand the company's legal duties around stress.

## Why Stress Is Not Just a Personal Issue

Stress can feel personal because it affects how we feel inside. But when stress is caused or made worse by work demands, it transforms from a private feeling into a workplace hazard. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) classifies stress resulting from work conditions as a legitimate health and safety risk.

The key phrase here is "work-related stress." It happens when pressures and risks in your working environment exceed your ability to cope.

## The Legal Framework: Health and Safety at Work Act 1974

Under the **Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974**, employers have a legal duty to protect workers' health, safety, and welfare "so far as is reasonably practicable." This includes mental health risks such as work-related stress.

So when your manager says stress is "personal," it's a handy excuse to sidestep responsibility — but it doesn't stand up legally. If your stress is linked to work demands or workplace culture, your employer has a duty to manage it.

## Understanding the HSE's Stress Risk Assessment and Management Standards

The HSE provides clear guidance and tools [brightonjournal.co.uk](https://www.brightonjournal.co.uk) for employers to address stress at work. At the heart of this is the **HSE Management Standards**, which act as a benchmark for identifying and managing workplace stress risks.

### What Are the HSE Management Standards?

The HSE Management Standards describe six key work-related stressors that employers should monitor and control:

- **Demands** – workload, work patterns, and the work environment
- **Control** – how much say employees have over their work
- **Support** – from managers and colleagues
- **Relationships** – promoting positive working to avoid conflict and bullying
- **Role** – whether people understand their role and if there's conflicting role expectations
- **Change** – how organisational change is managed and communicated

Employers are expected to carry out a **stress risk assessment** — a process to spot risks from these factors and take action to reduce or eliminate them.



## Stress Risk Assessment: What Employers Must Do

1. Identify the work stressors (using surveys, consultations, observation).
2. Assess the risk and decide who might be harmed and how serious the impact could be.
3. Implement control measures to reduce risks (for example, workload adjustments, better communication, training for managers).
4. Keep records and review controls regularly.

This isn't optional window dressing. It's a legal obligation under **the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999**. Failure to carry out a proper risk assessment and take action can lead to enforcement action or claims.

## Stress and the Equality Act 2010

Stress can crossover into disability law when it has a substantial and long-term effect on your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. The **Equality Act 2010** defines disability as:

A physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

Chronic stress, including work-related stress, burnout, anxiety disorders or depression, may meet this definition. If your stress is recognised as a disability, your employer has additional duties to make reasonable adjustments for you.

## What Could Reasonable Adjustments Look Like?

- Temporary reduction in workload
- Flexible working hours or remote working
- Additional support or mentoring
- Time off for therapy or counselling

## What to Say Back When Your Manager Says "Stress Is Personal"

Now that you understand the legal context, here are some practical things you can say or do to turn that vague brushing off into a concrete conversation about risk and duty.

## 1. Make It Clear Stress Can Be a Workplace Hazard

*"I understand stress can feel personal, but work-related stress is recognised by the Health and Safety Executive as a workplace hazard. This means the company has a legal duty to assess risks and protect us."*

## 2. Ask About the Company's Stress Risk Assessment

*"Has the company completed the HSE stress risk assessment? The HSE's Management Standards provide a good framework to identify pressure points and manage risks."*

## 3. Refer to the Employer's Legal Duties Explicitly

*"Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, the company is required to manage health and safety risks, including stress where it arises from work."*

## 4. If Your Stress Is Ongoing and Severe, Mention the Equality Act

*"Because this stress is affecting my wellbeing long-term, it could be classed as a disability under the Equality Act, which means the company needs to consider reasonable adjustments."*



## 5. Offer to Work Together on Solutions

*"I want to work with management to help identify and reduce these risks, whether it's workload, support, or role clarity. It'll help me and the team work more effectively and healthily."*

## Keep It Simple: Your Pre-Email Checklist

If you're thinking of writing this down, here's a quick checklist for your message or conversation:

- Describe specific stressors or situations causing you pressure.
- State clearly that work stress is a recognised health and safety hazard.

- Ask whether a stress risk assessment has been carried out in line with HSE guidance.
- Mention your expectation that your employer has a duty to protect your wellbeing under health and safety law.
- If relevant, mention the Equality Act disability angle.
- Propose working towards solutions collaboratively.
- Request confirmation of what actions will be taken.

## Sharing This Insight: Spread the Word Easily!

If you know someone else whose manager tells them “stress is personal,” feel free to share this helpful info quickly via your favourite channels. Just use these share links:

- Share on WhatsApp
- Share on Facebook
- Share on Instagram (via Stories or DM)
- Share on TikTok
- Tweet on X (Twitter)
- Share on YouTube (as comments or description)
- Share on Telegram
- Share on Viber
- Share on Pinterest

## Summary Table: Your Manager’s Excuse vs The Legal Reality

Your Manager Says What You Can Say Back Why It Matters “Stress is personal.” “Work-related stress is a recognised workplace hazard under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.” Work stress is not just about feelings; it’s a workplace health and safety issue requiring assessment and management. “We can’t do anything about personal stress.” “But if the stress is caused or worsened by work demands or lack of support, the company has a duty to assess risks and provide a safe environment.” Employers must conduct stress risk assessments under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. “We don’t have an HR department.” “Legal duties apply regardless of company size or HR presence; line managers have responsibilities too.” Legal health and safety duties are universal; no escaping obligation by not having HR. “Stress is your personal issue, not a disability.” “Long-term, substantial stress can be a disability under the Equality Act 2010, entitling me to reasonable adjustments.” Recognising stress as a disability triggers additional legal protections and accommodations.

## Final Thoughts

If your boss or manager tells you stress is “personal” and that’s the end of the conversation, now you know it’s not just a cliché dodge. Stress linked to the workplace is a proper risk that employers must tackle under both health and safety and equality laws. It’s okay to stand firm and ask for concrete actions based on clear legal duties — you don’t need an HR department to do that.

Stress is real. Stress is a hazard. And your employer must take it seriously.