AbilityNet Factsheet – September 2015

How computers can help reduce stress at work and in education

This factsheet looks at how you can use your computer to help manage stress – at work or in education – more effectively.

Work and study pressures, together with the ‘always on’ culture, can be significant causes of stress. If not managed successfully, more severe stress can lead to long-term sickness, anxiety and depression.

Computers not working properly can be extremely frustrating – but it’s not all bad news. There are many ways you can use your computer, tablet and/or smartphone to become better organised, more productive – and less stressed. Small changes to how your computer is set up, and to the software you use, can make significant differences.

It is important that employers understand their legal responsibilities to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their staff, to take action to reduce stress at work, and to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to prevent discrimination against their disabled employees.

Section 9 gives details of all the services that AbilityNet provides to help reduce the risk and impact of work-related stress on businesses, charities and individuals.

Links to other helpful resources are given in Section 10.
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1 What is stress?

Although there is no clear medical definition of stress, we have all experienced feeling stressed at some time – for example, when situations or events place us under significant pressure, or at times when we feel we don’t have much control over events. It can affect us both emotionally and physically.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) describe stress as “the adverse reaction a person has to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them.”

Being under some pressure is a normal part of life. However, if you start to feel overwhelmed by stress it can make existing problems worse and, potentially, lead to a mental health problem like anxiety or depression.

2 Why is it important to reduce stress?

People who are feeling stressed are unable to operate very effectively. Employees’ work and students’ studies will suffer if they are feeling tired and anxious; their concentration, focus and decision-making abilities are also likely to be adversely affected by stress.

Statistics from the Labour Force Survey show that work-related stress, anxiety or depression account for nearly 40% of all work-related illnesses. Over 11 million working days were lost due to stress, anxiety or depression in 2013/14, with an average of 23 days per case.

3 What can employers (and educationalists) do to help manage stress?

All employers have a legal ‘duty of care’ to ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of their staff. This includes taking action to minimise the risk of stress-related illness or injury to employees.

Employers who do not meet their statutory responsibilities for health and safety may be taken to an employment tribunal. They could also be vulnerable to claims of discrimination under the Equality Act, if they fail to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ for a disabled employee. Such adjustments may be necessary to ensure that anyone with an impairment has the same access to everything that is involved in doing and keeping a job as a non-disabled person.
To help tackle the problem, the HSE has developed a series of Management Standards and guidelines that address six key areas that can be causes of work-related stress.

Most colleges and universities now provide quite extensive guides and resources to help students with their studies and to cope more effectively with the increasing pressures of assignment deadlines and exams.

4 What causes stress?

According to the HSE, the six key risk factors for work related stress are:

- the demands of your job
- your control over your work
- the support you receive from managers and colleagues
- your relationships at work
- your role in the organisation
- change and how it’s managed.

Communications technology can help or hinder all of the above and, while computing problems can be very frustrating at the best of times, they can be particularly stressful when you’re feeling under pressure. Potential difficulties include:

- underpowered, slow computers (or networks)
- inappropriate software
- inadequate training and/or lack of technical support
- buggy software, malware or viruses
- broken equipment, or poor setup of existing equipment
- cluttered workstations, or a poor working environment.

Disabled people may experience these kinds of stressors even more acutely if they compound any additional challenges accompanying a condition such as dyslexia, brain injury, sight impairment or motor problems, at work and in education.

5 How can computers help reduce stress?

One of the most effective ways we can try to reduce stress is by managing external pressures more effectively, so that stressful situations don’t seem to arise quite so often.
Rather than being part of the problem, setting up and working with computers appropriately can help to substantially increase your organisation and control. Even small adjustments to how you work with your computer can make a significant difference to your efficiency and effectiveness, by boosting your:

- time management
- productivity
- work organisation and planning.

**My Computer My Way**

First of all, it is essential that your computing equipment is set up in the best way possible to suit your particular needs, especially if your capability may be affected by some kind of impairment.

*My Computer My Way* can help you achieve your optimum setup. It is a free, interactive tool developed by AbilityNet that makes any computer, tablet and smartphone easier to use. It covers all the accessibility features built into your desktop PC, laptop, tablet or smartphone, and all the mainstream operating systems – Windows, Windows Phone, Mac OS X, iOS and Android.

*My Computer My Way* shows you how best to adjust your computer to assist with:

- vision impairment – help seeing your screen
- hearing difficulties – help with sounds and audio
- motor issues – help with your keyboard and mouse
- cognitive problems – help with reading, spelling and understanding.

You can use it for free at [www.mycomputermyway.com](http://www.mycomputermyway.com)

### 6 How can you get better organised?

Improved work planning and organisation can help you to manage external demands and work pressures more successfully. One of the most effective ways of improving your time management and work organisation is to use personal information management software to:

- send, receive and manage emails
- create ‘to do’ lists and prioritise tasks
- keep a calendar, plan events and schedule projects
- store contact details.
Microsoft Outlook

Microsoft Outlook is amongst the best known personal information management software, providing a fully integrated view of your email, calendar, tasks and contacts. It can be synchronised with Exchange, Hotmail, Gmail, Yahoo and university mail servers etc. and also provides offline access to all your personal information.

Outlook is available for desktop computers and tablets on all platforms – Windows, Mac, iOS and Android. You can buy it as a standalone product or as part of the Office 365 suite from www.microsoftstore.com/store/msuk/en_GB/home

Mobile integration (syncing your email, calendars, tasks and contacts etc. with your smartphone and/or tablet) can also make a significant difference to your productivity by, for example, enabling you to work ‘on the move’ and to manage your emails offline.

Evernote

Evernote is another very useful productivity tool for organising work and projects. You can use it to capture many different types of content all in one note – including web pages, photographs, documents, PDFs and emails. You can also use Evernote to record audio notes, create checklists and reminders, and, on most mobile devices, add handwritten notes.

Notes are kept up-to-date across all your devices, and can be shared with other people to collaborate on projects.

Different versions of Evernote are available from www.evernote.com Although the ‘plus’ and ‘premium’ versions offer increased functionality and storage, the basic free version is adequate for many needs.

Health management apps and services

The world of mobile communications is rapidly developing and there are now innumerable apps and devices available to help people monitor and manage their health more effectively. These can help you to:

- measure your activity levels
- monitor your sleep patterns
- record what you eat and how many calories etc. you consume
- check your heart rate and blood pressure
- relax and try to relieve stress.
Whether you take advantage of new technology or resort to more traditional methods, keeping a diary of what you eat, your rest patterns, and/or when you might feel fatigued or stressed can be very helpful. These records may help you to identify possible patterns in your daily life that you could work with, or around, to boost your productivity.

Cognitive difficulties can be aggravated by fatigue. You may find that that there are certain times of day where you feel most tired, or particular foods that seem to reduce or help increase your energy levels. Utilising this knowledge can help you to plan your days so that you undertake the most demanding (or important) tasks at those times when you are likely to feel most energised.

7 What other tools can help boost your productivity?

Speech recognition and mind-mapping software can also help employees and students to work more efficiently and become more productive.

Speech recognition software

Speech recognition (also known as ‘voice recognition’) software automatically translates spoken words into written text – much faster and more accurately than you can type. As an alternative to typing on a keyboard, this combination of speed and accuracy can greatly reduce the stress of producing documents – especially for people with dyslexia (who often find writing particularly stressful) and for anyone suffering from a repetitive strain injury or with a physical disability.

The most successful commercial product, Dragon NaturallySpeaking, can deliver up to 99% accuracy in turning speech into text. It also enables you to use voice commands to dictate and edit documents, send email, search the Web and use social media. You can buy Dragon NaturallySpeaking from www.shop.nuance.co.uk/store/nuanceeu/en_GB/DisplayHomePage

Very useful free versions of speech recognition software that can offer around 96% accuracy are also built into all Windows-based PCs and Apple computers. My Computer My Way provides details of how to activate these key accessibility features. You can use it for free at www.mycomputermyway.com

Mind-mapping software

Mind maps are a type of ‘spider diagram’ used to visually organise information. A mind map is often created around a single concept, drawn as an image in the centre of a blank page, with associated ideas branching out.
Mind mapping can serve a variety of purposes but is especially useful for brainstorming, note taking, planning, organising and revising. Utilising a simple, visual approach, mind maps can help users to structure reports and presentations, and to break complex projects down into far more manageable sections and tasks. Mind mapping can also be very helpful for people with dyslexia who often find information in a non-linear format much easier to process.

Mind maps can either be drawn by hand or by using specialist software. Inspiration allows users to easily link ideas and concepts, and to use visual symbols as a memory aid. It is compatible with Dragon NaturallySpeaking, and enables you to export completed mind maps as PDF files or to PowerPoint. You can buy Inspiration at www.hands-free.co.uk/product/inspiration/

XMind is another powerful software that allows you to output mind maps in a wide variety of formats. The free version gives you full access to all kinds of diagrams that you can export to Evernote. The ‘plus’ version offers additional formats for exporting and sharing files, while the ‘pro’ version also provides brainstorming and presentation modes, and the ability to work with (and export) Gantt charts. You can buy XMind at www.xmind.net

Note-taking software

Trying to take notes while listening closely to information being presented at meetings, presentations, lectures and seminars can be stressful. Sonocent Audio Notetaker software helps remove some of the pressure by capturing live recordings (or imported audio) and converting these into accessible chunks of text that you can subsequently annotate, edit and summarise.

Audio Notetaker provides a ‘visual workspace’ for capturing, organising and sharing related information of any type – including audio, text, slides, images and web pages. It is also a very useful tool for preparing and practising your own presentations.

Audio Notetaker can use audio from almost anywhere, whether its captured through your laptop mic or from skype conversations, podcasts or another digital recorder. You can buy it from www.sonocent.com/en/

You can also record and annotate live speech on a smart phone or tablet using the free Sonocent Recorder app. This is available for both Android (from Google Play) and iOS (from the App Store) devices. Once you have taken your recording with the app, you can share your file with Audio Notetaker via Wi-Fi, and then you can use the software to take more detailed notes, summaries and transcriptions.
My Study Bar

Aimed at students but also useful in other situations, MyStudyBar is a multi-functional tool designed to help students overcome problems that many commonly experience with studying, reading and writing. It combines a set of portable open source and freeware applications to support effective learning, including:

- **XMind** for mind mapping, planning and organisation
- **T-Bar** for customising font and colour backgrounds
- **Lingoes** for when you need a talking dictionary
- **LetMeType** for help with text input
- **Balabolka** and **Orato** for converting text to speech.

*MyStudyBar* is only available for Windows PC. There is no Apple Mac version. You can get it from [www.eduapps.org](http://www.eduapps.org).

8 How important is training?

The potential software ‘solutions’ outlined in this factsheet will only have the desired effect in helping to reduce stress if users are provided with adequate training and given sufficient opportunity to develop their familiarity and proficiency with the software.

Training will be most effective when it is spaced out over time and geared towards the specific needs of the individual, focusing on their particular tasks and challenges. Periodic training helps users to practice and consolidate new skills in between coaching sessions.

A wide range of private and voluntary organisations offer computer training services. The AbilityNet factsheet on *Technical help and training resources* gives contact details for many organisations that provide ICT training and support for disabled people.

The suppliers of the software packages highlighted in this factsheet provide online guidance and tutorials about how to get the most from their products. There is also a wealth of free training resources available online, including on *YouTube* and at [www.alison.com](http://www.alison.com).
9 How can AbilityNet help you to manage stress?

AbilityNet is a leading authority on accessibility and assistive technologies. We can assist individuals, charities and employers by providing:

- advice and information
- workplace assessments
- consultancy services.

Our Workplace Assessment Service

This factsheet presents some options for making more effective use of computers to help manage stress at work and in education. However, it cannot make tailored recommendations to suit each individual’s particular needs.

AbilityNet’s Workplace Assessment Service provides a one-to-one holistic review. This will not only look at how your computer hardware and software is currently set up, it will also consider your working patterns and relationships, the requirements of your role, regular tasks and any other factors which can impact on health and productivity.

One size does not fit all. We believe that each case is unique and that individual attention is vital. Superficially similar cases may demand quite different approaches, and the solutions we propose are arrived at through discussion, evaluation of all the relevant circumstances and the trial use of alternative devices (where these are recommended).

Our assessments integrate personal and technical considerations to arrive at sound and realistic suggestions, documented in a report. To find out more about our Workplace Assessment Service, please visit www.abilitynet.org.uk/workplace or call 01926 465 247.

Consultancy services

Our expert consultants are also available to assist employers who wish to take a broad, longer-term view in designing computer systems and associated work processes. Our experience and expertise can help you to achieve safe, healthy and productive working procedures.

To find out more about AbilityNet’s consultancy services, call 01962 465 247 or email sales@abilitynet.org.uk

DSA/Student Assessments

If you have a disability and are in higher or further education, you may qualify for a Disabled Students Allowance (DSA). If you are eligible you will receive a
free assessment and may qualify for a grant towards any adjustments that you might require. This could help with the costs of buying a new computer or any other specialist equipment you might need.

For information, please visit www.abilitynet.org.uk/dsa or call 01926 464 095.

10 Other useful links and resources

AbilityNet factsheets

AbilityNet's library of factsheets and information sheets provides an extensive range of practical advice about specific conditions and the hardware and software adaptations that can help people of any age use computers to fulfil their potential. Topics include:

- Dyslexia and computing
- Controlling the computer with your voice
- and many more.

All these resources are free to download from www.abilitynet.org.uk/factsheets

Health and Safety Executive (HSE)

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is the national independent watchdog for work-related health, safety and illness. Its main aim is to secure the health, safety and welfare of people at work and protect others from risks to health and safety from work activity.

The HSE also plays a major role in producing advice on health and safety issues, and guidance on relevant legislation. The role of enforcement is split between HSE and local authorities depending on the business sector.

Information on the Management Standards and related resources for reducing work-related stress can be downloaded from the HSE website at http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm

Mind

Mind is a national charity providing advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem. You can download its booklet and advice on How to manage stress at http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/stress/#.VbZGQr5Ghhp
11 About AbilityNet

AbilityNet is the national charity that supports people with any disability, of any age. Our specialist services help disabled people to use computers and the internet to improve their lives, whether at work, at home or in education. We offer:

- free advice and information
- accessibility services
- DSA/student assessments
- workplace assessments
- IT help at home
- IT volunteers.

Support us

Visit www.abilitynet.org.uk/donate to learn how you can support our work.

Contact us

- Telephone 0800 269 545
- Email enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk
- Web: www.abilitynet.org.uk

We are always keen to help share knowledge about accessibility and assistive technology. If you have any questions about how you may use the contents of this factsheet, please contact us at AbilityNet and we will do all we can to help.

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