

Talking to your line manager about stress



Are you able to talk to your line manager about your stress levels? If you're wondering where to start, read on. We unpack what you need to consider before having a discussion.

Being a teaching assistant can be a calling, but it comes with — sometimes intense — stress.

Even if you love your job, it can be tough to admit to yourself that you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed. Let alone talk to your line manager!

But those awkward and embarrassing, but not world ending (!) conversations can sometimes be the difference between staying well enough to keep in the job, and getting burned out.



Ask yourself

Your school might have a mental health policy in place which would be worth reading to understand what support is available to you. You could talk these through with your line manager to see what might work for you within the requirements of your job and the context of the school.

“Supervision chats (I think that's what they are called) are a good idea as it's you being called to chat rather than you having the courage to go.

Teaching Assistant

Tips for having a discussion with your line manager

1 Be upfront

Often line manager meetings can focus heavily on the tasks of the job rather than the bigger picture and your mental health and wellbeing. Remember, it's ok to ask your line manager to prioritise time to talk about you! Maybe send an email briefly stating what you want to talk about and asking for a time where you can share your thoughts and ask for their help. This will give them time to book something in their diary and be prepared to focus on you. Ultimately, it will be irrelevant to talk about your job, if you are not able to look after yourself and the things you will need support with to do your job in the best way possible.



2 Understand what support you can access

If you are feeling like you need support, you are experiencing stress or mental ill health there are things that are available to support you in work. You might find that there could be some changes to your role, your working hours, how you are communicated with or your workload for example. Once you have chatted through some of these ideas your line manager might have to go away to look into if or how they might work and come back to you. Once you have agreed any changes (often referred to as reasonable adjustments) you might want to ask your line manager to put them in a letter with a copy kept on your file for review at an agreed time in the future.

Find out what 'reasonable adjustments' your manager could put in place for you before you meet. Visit the ACAS website <https://www.acas.org.uk/reasonable-adjustments> for helpful information and ask HR for your school's workplace policies if you don't have copies. Make sure you get any reasonable adjustments agreed in writing with your line manager.

Can you spot the signs of severe stress and burnout in yourself?

Insomnia, irritability, loss of appetite, heart palpitations may all be indicators that your body is having to work hard to cope with the extra adrenaline in your system. If you are experiencing these symptoms, first, be kind to yourself. You're a human, not a machine.

But now might be the moment to talk to your line manager about steps you can take towards managing your stress levels. This is vital for your health in the long run.



Support for individuals:

Our free helpline is an essential lifeline for teaching assistants, teachers and all education staff who are struggling. It is confidential and available 24/7 on **08000 562 561**.



3 Don't rush it

Timing is everything — don't be afraid to request a time of day that works for you. A conversation about mental health can be challenging and a vulnerable experience for everyone involved. Don't try to fit it in between other meetings where you may be interrupted. Similarly, the end of the day may not be ideal if either of you need to leave promptly. Allow adequate time for the conversation; if you feel upset or distressed you need enough time to explain how you are feeling. You could suggest a few options for meeting dates and times and explain the reasons why you have suggested them. You could always put this in an email if it's easier.

4 Don't put it off

It can be tempting to put off difficult conversations at work, especially when they are related to your emotions or mental health. But, the reality is if you get help sooner you will reduce the risk of burnout and more serious health issues in the longer term. It's also worth remembering that if you are to look after and provide the best education for your students, you have to spend time refuelling and looking after your health and wellbeing too. Make use of the support available to you when you need it.

5 Find the right place

It is important to know that if you are having a vulnerable conversation about your mental health, you won't be overheard and you can have space to express your feelings without being interrupted. Have a think about where you could go that you would feel the most comfortable and make the suggestion to your line manager ahead of the meeting.

6 After the conversation

You may recognise a feeling of exhaustion after this type of conversation, you may have heightened stress levels. Everyone will respond differently, but recognise that you have done a great thing. Your line manager is likely to want to explore next steps and get back to you with a stress risk assessment and plan, for example, and this is something that should be completed together. The plan outlines any triggers and what can be put in place to support you. It should be something that is regularly reviewed to see if it is helping you and if any changes need to be made.

What if talking to my line manager doesn't help?

We know how disheartening it could feel if the conversation you've built yourself up for doesn't help your situation. If you find you need more immediate support or the conversation with your line manager doesn't go how you expected, you can reach out to your HR department, SLT and Education Support for further help and advice.

