

Stress at work isn't just "in your head" or a personal failing. It's a recognised health and safety hazard that employers must manage under UK law. Among the many factors contributing to workplace stress, **control over work** is one of the most critical. This post unpacks what "control" really means, how it links to brightonjournal.co.uk legal duties, and why simply telling employees to "be more resilient" misses the point.

Why Does Control Matter for Stress?

"Control" in the context of work stress refers to the *degree of autonomy* an employee has in how they carry out their tasks — sometimes called **decision latitude**. When people have low control, they feel overwhelmed, uncertain, and trapped.

The classic Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Management Standards framework identifies control as one of six key risk factors influencing stress-related ill health:

- Demands
- Control
- Support
- Relationships
- Role
- Change

While high demands with high control can motivate, high demands with low control increase stress and risk of mental health problems.





What Does "Control Over Work" Really Mean?

Control isn't just about big strategic decisions or flexible work hours. It includes:

- How and when work tasks are done
- Choice over methods and work pace
- Input into team and project decisions
- Ability to take breaks or reprioritise tasks

Lack of control — or *autonomy stress* — is a key predictor of burnout and presenteeism. It's why micro-managing bosses often worsen stress rather than help employees cope.

Stress as a Health and Safety Hazard

Under the UK's **Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974**, employers must ensure the health, safety, and welfare of their employees "so far as is reasonably practicable." This legal responsibility extends to risks from workplace stress where it stems from work design, management, or organisational factors.

The HSE states clearly that stress caused or made worse by work and not properly managed is a workplace hazard. This means employers must:

1. Identify stress risk factors such as low control, high demands, and poor support
2. Assess these risks through a formal **stress risk assessment**
3. Take action to eliminate or control the risks
4. Monitor effectiveness and review regularly

The Role of HSE Stress Risk Assessments

The HSE provides a step-by-step approach to managing work-related stress through its Management Standards. This includes a specific tool — the HSE Stress Indicator Tool — that helps employers gauge control levels among staff, alongside other risk factors.

Unfortunately, many small employers (including creative studios, cafes, and micro-agencies) don't have HR departments or formal processes. If you're a manager responsible for wellbeing, a simple and short checklist can help "translate" vague stress complaints into focussed risk points linked to control and autonomy:

- Which tasks do employees find they cannot influence at all?
- Are they able to change how or when they do their work?
- Is there a formal process for feedback or decision input?
- How flexible is break or rescheduling policy?

If the answer is "no" or "I don't know" to many of these, it's a red flag for low control to be addressed.

Equality Act and Control: Disability Considerations

Control over work also matters from the perspective of the **Equality Act 2010**, which protects disabled employees from discrimination. The Act's definition of disability includes mental health conditions recognised as impairing normal activities.

An employee with a disability related to stress or anxiety may need reasonable adjustments — often involving increased control or autonomy — such as:

- Flexibility in deadlines or task allocation
- Options for modifying work processes or tools
- Support for gradual return to work with tailored decision-making latitude
- Clearer communication and involvement in organisational changes

Failing to accommodate these needs can expose an employer to discrimination claims. It also undermines wellbeing and performance.

Practical Steps for Employers and Managers

If you manage a small team or run a micro-business, here's a quick practical checklist to understand and improve control at work:

1. **Conduct a simple stress risk assessment** — identify low control triggers through employee feedback.
2. **Create clear, documented processes** showing who makes decisions, how, and when.
3. **Increase autonomy** by delegating decision-making where possible.
4. **Train managers** to avoid micro-management and encourage employee input.
5. **Use the HSE Management Standards as a benchmark** — accessible and practical, even without HR.
6. **Consider reasonable adjustments** for disabled staff, focusing on control-related needs.
7. **Review regularly** to catch any changes increasing stress risks.

Remember: "Control over work" isn't a luxury or "nice to have." It's a fundamental building block to prevent work-related stress risks that are legally actionable.

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Summary Table: Control and Stress at Work

Aspect	What It Means	Impact of Low Control	Employer Action	Decision Latitude	Employee input into how and when work is done	Feelings of powerlessness & frustration	Work Methods
Choice over techniques and approaches	Inflexibility causing overwhelm	Allow flexibility to suit strengths	Breaks & Rescheduling	Ability to take rest and manage priorities	Poor recovery, higher fatigue	Support flexible breaks and reprioritisation	Equality Act Rights
Reasonable adjustments for disabilities	Risk of discrimination & worsening health	Implement tailored adjustments to increase control					

Closing Thoughts

If your workplace is one where everything—including wellbeing—is piled on one busy manager without HR support, remember: control over work is something you can fix with small, concrete changes rather than vague wellbeing talk. Use the HSE Management Standards and risk assessments as your safety net, not just lip service. Stress isn't a "personal resilience" issue; it's a hazard created or worsened by low control and poor management practices.

Good employers take control seriously because it's legally required and ethically right. When control improves, so does employee wellbeing—and productivity.