

Employee requests stress leave from work: What you need to know

Work-related stress is widespread in today's fast-paced world, which is likely something you can attest to personally — as [94%](#) of workers report feeling stress at work. While dealing with the occasional stressful situation is to be expected with nearly any position, too much workplace stress can start to affect an employee's physical and mental health negatively.

Elevated stress levels can lead to severe health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, depression, anxiety, and gastrointestinal issues, to name a few. Burnout is also a serious issue, with [63%](#) of US workers reporting that they're ready to quit their jobs to avoid experiencing more workplace stress.

Sources of stress may vary, such as excessive workloads, financial issues, trouble at home, and difficult coworkers/managers. If you've tried addressing your stress by taking a mental health day, seeing a therapist, or talking with your employer to no avail, you may need to take the next step. Likewise, if you have good employees who can't seem to shake the stress, it might be time to take action.

What's that?

Stress leave from work is one option for an employee to recover & return to their usual self.

If the condition is serious enough, the FMLA (The Family and Medical Leave Act) has an employment law allowing employees to take a protected unpaid leave from work to deal with excessive stress. While it's not paid sick leave, the employer will have to keep the position open during the a leave of absence.

Read on to learn everything you need to know about taking a stress leave from work, including how to qualify for protected leave.

Why Do Employees Go On Stress Leave?

There are many reasons why an employee may need to take off work due to severe symptoms of stress.

The [APA](#) (American Psychological Association) recently released a report covering the compounding pressure and workplace stressors employees have been experiencing since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Here's a quick summary of their findings:

- For every three in five employees, stress has negatively affected their work performance.
- 50% say lack of involvement in decisions contributes to their stress.
- The most commonly reported workplace stressors are low salaries (56%), long hours (54%), and lack of

opportunity for growth.

- 41% of employees in positions requiring manual labor report feelings of emotional and physical exhaustion.

It's clear that workplace stress is not only abundant, but it also causes employees to become far less productive.

When stress reaches the point of causing physical and mental fatigue, employees may need to go on stress leave to get themselves back to 100%. This will benefit the company, too, as stressed employees often resort to absenteeism.

Whenever the employee returns refreshed and replenished, their quality of work and productivity will drastically improve.

Reasons to Go On a Stress Leave

Other commonly reported reasons to go on stress leave from work include:

- **Work environment issues.** If someone works in an especially noisy, hot/cold, or physically demanding work environment — their stress levels may elevate to the point where they need to request stress leave to regain their sanity.
- **Job-related stress.** Does a job require working nights and weekends on a regular basis? If so, that's a surefire recipe for burnout. Other job-related issues requiring stress leave include long commutes (driving an hour or more one-way), unexpected challenges, and stringent demands.
- **Work-life balance issues.** Having to deal with a sick parent while contending with the demands of a full-time position can be incredibly stressful. Family emergencies can also get in the way, such as the death of a spouse or loved one. Troubles maintaining a healthy work-life balance can also cause mental and physical health problems, such as not being able to see family enough when working 80-hour workweeks.
- **Problems with management.** The adage 'people don't leave companies; they leave managers' rings true with this one. Unfair treatment, unclear expectations, rudeness, and a lack of communication can wreak havoc on an employee's life, causing them to pine for some stress-free (and manager-free) vacation time.
- **Financial problems.** It's challenging to get a restful night's sleep when unsure how to make the bills. While a low salary was a notable stressor reported from the ADA study, taking an unpaid leave may not be the best remedy for an employee with financial stress.

These are all reasons why someone may feel the need to request to go on a stress leave to escape from work and recover their mental health.

Signs That You're Too Stressed Out

How do you know if someone needs to go on stress leave?

It can be challenging to realize an employee's stress has gotten out of control, as it's common to experience some workplace stress with any position. Similarly, it can be difficult to identify when your own stress has reached such a point.



There are a few physical and mental symptoms of stress that can effect affecting someone's day-to-day life.

- **Feeling sad/tearing up all the time.** If someone has become especially emotionally sensitive lately, it could be a sign your workplace stress is affecting them.
- **Being more irritable and angry than usual.** Does every little thing suddenly get on an employee's nerves and cause them to lash out? If so, workplace stressors are likely the culprit.
- **Restlessness.** Can you not seem to sit still and engage with a TV show or novel like you used to? That's a sign that you're anxious and preoccupied with stress from work.
- **Insomnia.** Not being able to fall asleep is a physical manifestation of stress that has a compounding effect. That's because the less you're able to get quality sleep, the more depressed, anxious, and stressed you'll become.
- **Frequent headaches.** If you're always reaching for the Excedrin, your head likely aches so much due to the pressure/stress you're under.
- **Digestive issues.** Elevated stress levels will increase gut motility and fluid secretion, which causes digestive issues like heartburn, indigestion, nausea, constipation, abdominal pain, and even nausea and

vomiting.

Self-care is essential, so if any of these symptoms show up, it's crucial to take them seriously and do something about them.

Qualifying for Stress Leave

There is no official regulation specifically for stress leave. As such, to formally request stress leave, an employee will need to meet a few qualifications under FMLA.

First, they need to have worked for your employer for at least **12 months or 1,250 hours to qualify**. So if they just started the job 6 months ago, they won't be able to take stress leave from work.

Next, **your company must have at least 50 employees, or you don't have to provide FMLA legally**. This rule doesn't apply to government agencies or schools, regardless of the number of employees they have.

If an employee doesn't qualify for FMLA leave, that may not be the end of it. There may be state laws or programs in the area that provide weeks of unpaid leave for stress management, and there are always other options (more on this in a bit). Likewise, an employee with chronic anxiety or a related problem, could find protection under the Americans With Disabilities Act.

How long is an FMLA stress leave?

An employee is allowed to take up to 12 weeks off within a 12-month period. **It's not paid leave, but the employee's position will have to be maintained while they're away.**

They'll need to meet with a licensed healthcare provider to provide a medical certificate (or doctor's note) documenting the stress-related health condition.

FMLA defines a serious health condition as an illness, impairment, or injury that requires:

- Inpatient care
- Hospice care
- Continued treatment
- Residential medical care

They'll need to provide proof of one of these to qualify for protected time off. There are a few other stipulations involved, including the following:

- At least twice a year, they'll need to visit a healthcare provider for treatment.
- The condition continues over an extended period of time.

- The condition may be episodic, but it doesn't require them to be fully incapacitated.

As long as they can check all these boxes, they'll be able to take stress leave from work without the worry of losing their job.

What an Employer Must Do Under FMLA

Under a formal stress leave, you won't be able to terminate the employee for their leave of absence. (However, the employee could be let go for downsizing, or if you discover they were engaged in inappropriate behavior like theft.)

The employee doesn't have to be given the exact same job they had before, however, you must provide a position for you **at the same location with the same work hours and pay**. That way, the employee can return to their regular standard of living once the stress leave is over.

You CANNOT change an employee to part-time if they were a full-time employee before taking leave. You also can't terminate an employee's health insurance plan during such leave, ensuring they have access to the insurance policy the entire time off.

That can be a real lifesaver, especially for visiting clinics and healthcare providers for treatment.

3 Tips for Taking a Stress Leave from Work

Now that you know about qualifying for stress leave, you need to make sure the proper notification process happens. You want to ensure an employee has enough time to recover, otherwise, you'll still have a stressed employee in the end. Under FMLA, employees have up to 12 weeks to take if needed, and could take time as intermittent FMLA leave instead of one single chunk if needed.

Tip #1: Understand an employee's rights



First, you should familiarize yourself with the FMLA and an employee's rights regarding the types of leave they can take. Besides learning the requirements set by FMLA, you should also consult your company policy on sick days and stress leave. If you aren't sure, you can visit your HR department and ask them.

You may discover that your company already has a policy in place for stress leave, in which case you can simply follow that policy. If not, you'll need to ensure the employee is covered by FMLA before moving forward.

Tip #2: Speak with a Healthcare Professional

As stated before, a doctor's note will be needed before an employee can take leave.

If an employee has not consulted with a healthcare professional, you should request that they do so to both verify the need, and determine a proper amount of time to take off. For instance, if their stress has caused significant gastrointestinal issues (such as GERD), they may need more time off than just a couple of days.

Tip #3: Speaking with an employee

Ultimately, you should have a discussion with the employee, along with the human resources department (if there is one).

During this time, you can bring up any workplace issues that caused the employee's stress to get out of control. If an employee is requesting stress leave, it may indicate that there are larger issues at play in your workplace, and that other employees may also be stressed. Use this as an opportunity to learn about those issues, and look for ways to address them.

Returning to Work

Once an employee's stress leave is complete, you should work with them to devise a return-to-work plan. It's not a good idea to plunge an employee headfirst back into the situation that stressed them out in the first place, so try and ease them back into work.

Consider having an employee start with a reduced workload, or less demanding responsibilities initially. This will help them get back into the swing of things without being overloaded.

What if an employee doesn't qualify for stress leave?

If they aren't protected under FMLA, and your state doesn't have any medical leave laws, there are still options for giving employees a much-needed mental health break.

First, they can **take a few mental health days**, either by using their sick days or vacation time. Sometimes all it takes is a few days away from a stressful situation to get your zest for life back.

They might also be able to take **unpaid personal leave** from your company. While it won't be formally protected time off under FMLA, it can still provide the time you need to rest & recharge. It's important to consider this, after all, would you rather let a good employee take a few days off, or lose them permanently because of stress?

Lastly, you can opt to let the employee take a **leave of absence**. Once again, this type of leave isn't protected under any act, so you're not required to keep the employee's job open. However, if you're able to do so, having an employee return will be much easier than trying to hire and onboard a new one.

Concluding Thoughts: Stress Leave from Work

Employees experiencing physical or mental health issues should seek help from a healthcare professional. No job is worth stressing yourself into a health condition, and employers should not want employees who are extremely stressed. Not only do they do worse work, but it can increase turnover, and create an unhealthy work environment.

If employees need to take stress leave, it's good to first assess if there's a problem within your organization, or if the employee has personal issues causing the stress. Either way, letting employees take the time to recover will not only show that you care as an employee, but will help you keep good employees on staff.