

Velliv



For employees

# What do you know?

– preventing stress in the workplace

This material was prepared in collaboration between Velliv and PPclinic

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### Wellbeing and stress prevention in the workplace

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# What do you know?

## – preventing stress in the workplace

### Joint stress prevention

"Oh, I feel so stressed today," your 14-year-old daughter says as she runs out the door to make it to tennis. But is she talking about real stress? And how do we know when we need to be concerned and take action and when we don't?

This booklet is about stress and how, as a company, you can work to prevent it. We're not offering an easy solution, but we are giving you our take on what's needed to prevent early symptoms of stress taking hold and ending in sick leave.

We return to two important points several times in the booklet. First, prevention pays off. The better you are at recognising the symptoms and acting on them quickly, the easier it is to avoid a vicious spiral where the symptoms develop into an actual state of stress. And second, we believe that the workplace is central to preventing this. We're not saying that stress is due solely to work-related conditions, but symptoms of stress often show up in the workplace, and you'll be able to help make a plan for this. Stress symptoms require concrete action – no matter where and why they occur.

The first part of the booklet is about stress, the symptoms of stress, the difference between being busy and stress, about the importance of working with prevention in what we call "peacetime" and

about the stress-prevention method. The second part is about how, as a manager, you can become aware of your employees and practise stress-prevention management.

The booklet can be supplemented with two different sets of dialogue cards. One set can be used for dialogue in the department – with both employees and managers. The second set is aimed at management teams and focuses on stress-prevention management. The goal of both sets of dialogue cards is to put the messages in the booklets into practice in the workplace and to ensure that you read and talk about how you help each other to prevent stress. Stress in the workplace can be prevented – with the right knowledge, understanding and solid action.

### Stress is increasing

Despite all the talk and writing on stress, the number of people presenting with symptoms of stress is increasing. In 2004, nine per cent of the Danish population indicated that they often felt stressed. Since then, that figure has grown to 25 percent and it's continuing to rise. The indication is that, as a society, we aren't building a bridge between the theories of stress and effective stress prevention in practice, and we haven't yet managed to break the stress curve.



The symptoms of stress can be both physical and mental. And they can be chronic. If you have ever been on leave due to stress, or if you know someone who has, you know that the symptoms experienced in connection with stress can be very unpleasant and feel threatening. The symptoms are real, and they can make you sick if you don't intervene in time.

The difference between stress and being busy Most people know what it's like to be busy. It's uncomfortable for some people, but many people find it inspiring and satisfying because they get so much done, which gives them a sense of achievement and contentment.

A certain level of stress energises us and sharpens our senses. It can make us do extraordinary things and turn us into high performers. So, we shouldn't be afraid of an appropriate level of stress experienced as 'busyness'. Where we need to pay attention is if the busyness and level of stress increase and we forget to take, or lose, the opportunity to recover – that is, to gear down and refuel again. This is where the imbalance and experience of losing control sets in, and the symptoms of stress develop.

The trick isn't to remove the burden or the busyness but to keep an eye on its state and adjust the level of stress as needed. You don't have to worry about a severe stress state coming out of the blue. It doesn't. There will always be symptoms before you get so bad that you lose control. It's about recognising those symptoms, taking them seriously and acting.

#### **Symptoms of stress**

When it comes to stress, there are a number of symptoms that most people experience. You may not present with all these symptoms, but most people experience more than one. And many people are familiar with one or more of the symptoms from other situations; for example, headaches and fatigue can also be a sign of the flu or that you haven't been drinking enough water. Therefore, the symptoms themselves are nothing to worry about – it's about not letting them continue. In order to talk about stress, symptoms must have been present for more than two weeks.

## **Early signs of stress**

### → **Physical signs of stress**

- Headache
- Dizziness
- Feeling uneasy in their body
- Palpitations
- Muscular tension
- A tendency to sweat
- Shortness of breath
- Dry mouth
- Infections
- Stomach pain
- Frequent desire to urinate
- Changes in the appetite
- Nausea
- Constipation
- Diarrhoea
- Reduced sex drive

### → **Mental signs of stress**

- Excessive thoughts
- Negative, self-criticising or reproachful thoughts
- Worry
- Anxiety
- Mood swings, feeling depressed
- Shame
- Feeling to blame, having a guilty conscience
- Irritability, anger
- Tiredness
- Problems sleeping
- Difficulty remembering and concentrating
- Indecision
- Low self-confidence
- Cries easily

# Stress doesn't need peace and quiet – it needs action

If you think that stress is a fixed and clearly defined disorder triggered by an outside (over)load, you probably also think there's only one real treatment. And most people will likely say that's peace and quiet.

But stress is much more nuanced than that. It covers a wide variety of conditions. There may be a need for peace and quiet for a shorter period of time; the person experiencing chronic stress symptoms may need sick leave. Peace and calm – perhaps – alleviate the symptoms of stress for a time and can put a stop to some worries, negative thoughts and feelings of discomfort. However, this entails a risk that the same thoughts, feelings and physical discomfort will worsen if a sustainable solution isn't found early on in the process.

## A nuanced view of stress

If we want to understand stress and develop effective methods to prevent it, then we need to challenge the myths and develop a nuanced understanding of stress. Stress can be a phenomenon of overburdening that develops in response to too much work, as many people currently believe. But that isn't necessarily the case. We should understand stress, to a much greater extent, as an individual intellectual and emotional reaction to having experienced strain – a reaction that can

occur as a consequence of many different factors. This is why we can never break the stress curve with a one-size-fits-all solution, such as reducing the workload, improving the employee's overall health or moving the employee away from the workplace. We also need to be interested in the individual person's experience and interpretation; that is, the thoughts and feelings that they have about the strain they are experiencing.

## Stress is about thoughts and feelings

Stress can stem from one or more external burdens: for example, having too many or too complex tasks at work combined with private issues, such as family illness or divorce – burdens and strains that require something special from us over a long period of time. But it can also be due to worrying, negative thoughts and an experience of unfairness or from losing overview and control in your life. You probably know, for example, the experience of looking in your diary and reacting to the sight of all the things you need to do in the coming time. You aren't burdened here and now, but your thoughts on how you're going to accomplish it all and the feelings of uneasiness and anxiety about how it'll go can create such a reaction.

The way in which we each react is very much related to our experience of the situation and how



Remember: we have a mutual responsibility to look after each other – even when things are moving quickly.

much control we feel we have in the situation. If we experience symptoms of stress, we tend to think that the burden has to be removed immediately, but sometimes it's important to stop and take a closer look at why we are experiencing pressure before we remove the strain without further ado. In the green box, you can read an example of how two people can experience the same work assignment completely differently and experience different degrees of pressure in connection with it. Notice that the job – the objective burden – is the same,

but the experience and interpretation of the situation are very different. The example demonstrates that stress prevention doesn't necessarily lie in removing the workload, but in examining how the individual experiences and interprets the situation. So, there are three aspects:

- **Burden/strain**
- **the individual interpretation**
- **Reaction**

## Uncertainty or curiosity – we react differently

A manager goes to one of their employees and tells them about a huge, new project, for which they are going to be the anchor person. It's complex and important, and the parameters aren't yet entirely clear. The employee can respond in two ways:

### A:

"Oh no, what I hear my boss saying is that I alone am going to be responsible for the success of the project. I'll have to find a way to do it and all my other work at the same time. My boss expects me to be able to do it – otherwise she wouldn't have given me the job. If I can't do it, I'll disappoint her, and who knows, maybe they won't be able to use me here anymore."

### B:

"It's a complex but exciting project. My boss has asked me to be the anchor, so I'll have to try to take the first steps and get an overview of the project. If it gets too difficult for me, I'll have to ask for help from my boss or colleagues. I'll have to work out how much time I'm going to need to spend on it, so I know what other jobs I can't do, and then I'll have to talk to my boss about it."

### From burden to reaction

The three-part model breaks with the traditional view of stress. The model shows that it's not just about looking at or removing the burden from the employee. It's just as much about taking an interest in the individual employee's experience and interpretation of the situation. And that is vital when working together to prevent stress in the workplace.

### The stress prevention method

In our experience, there is a lot of anxiety about getting too close when it comes to stress. For example, both managers and colleagues may feel uncertain about whether or not a situation is dire enough for them to say something to the stressed person. And the person may hope that the symptoms will go away, or they are ashamed of them, and, therefore, prefer to avoid talking about them. But if no one intervenes, then it will result in the stress reaction being allowed to develop further.

If we are to prevent stress in earnest, it's imperative we all become better at intervening early on.

We propose a method of four crucial steps:

**STEP 1: Spot it** – Keep an eye out for early signs of stress.

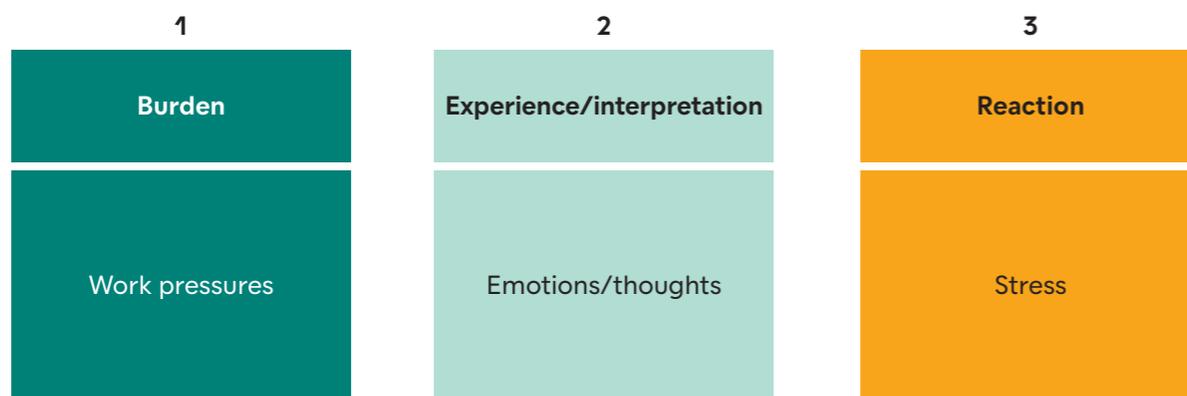
**STEP 2: Ask and understand** – Be professionally curious and investigate what the signs of stress are really about. Perhaps it's not an external burden, but something else entirely that's at play.

**STEP 3: Find the solution** – Find a solution by talking to each other. Implement it and try it.

**STEP 4: Follow up** – Have follow-up meetings to ensure that the solution is sustainable and adjust it as necessary.

As a workplace, you can start by deciding to follow the method. We suggest that managers then take responsibility for following the individual steps in the process. Be curious about what the symptoms are due to and what solution you can try – together. And maintain follow-up meetings. Early intervention doesn't have to be very difficult, just as the solution doesn't have to be overly comprehensive.

## The three-part model



Source: I'll do it tomorrow – 4 steps to stress prevention management by Helle Folden Dybdahl, Jesper Karle and Lars Aakerlund, Pppublishers, 2019.

### Ambition in the workplace: Dialogue and concrete action

Despite a company working actively with stress prevention, symptoms of stress in employees can't always be avoided. However, with early intervention we avoid the symptoms developing into a genuine stress condition. Stress in the workplace isn't something that either an employee or a manager can prevent or manage alone. Stress must be handled jointly. A workplace that wants to solve the problem of stress with one hand, or where only some managers and employees want a change, will find it difficult to succeed. The same goes for a workplace that talks about stress prevention but doesn't act on it. Stress prevention requires dialogue and concrete action.

Dialogue is, to a great extent, about agreeing on the kind of workplace you want to have. We need to move away from talking about blame, but much more towards how you have a joint responsibility to prevent stress if change is to be brought about.

It may also be important to have a dialogue about what impedes or hinders talking about stress. Both spoken and unspoken ideas and notions about stress affect the culture of a workplace and it can mean that neither employees nor managers dare to engage in dialogue.

Is there a kind of "real-men-don't-get-stress"/it's-a-sign-of-weakness culture? Or that "if I show signs of stress symptoms, I'll never be promoted"? Or are stress symptoms perceived as proof that not enough "mindfulness" is being practised – "it's my own fault"? If this mindset is present, it's clear that nobody wants to talk about stress symptoms aloud, which makes it difficult to create a dialogue and, thereby, prevent genuine states of stress.

## Important to know about stress

- Stress is a normal reaction that all human beings can develop.
- Stress is an intellectual and emotional reaction to something a person experiences as difficult or as a burden or strain.
- The burden may be due to work, but it can also be caused by something else entirely.
- Stress can be related to workload, but certainly not always.
- Given that stress isn't always due to too much work, then neither can stress always be cured by reducing the workload or seeking out peace and quiet.
- Experiencing short-term symptoms of stress is a natural part of being human and isn't dangerous. We shouldn't be afraid of stress symptoms but should rather ensure they don't persist and worsen.
- Prevention works if we focus on the individual's experience and interpretation of the burden and the symptoms.
- Prevention works if we step in when the symptoms begin – not if they have developed into a disorder. Symptoms often start with a feeling of dissatisfaction due to a change or an experience of unfairness.
- The workplace is part of the solution, regardless of whether the cause of the stress symptoms is in the individual's work or private life.



### Work in peacetime – guidelines, roles and expectations

Much stress-prevention work can, with advantage, happen in peacetime. Peacetime means a time when there are no difficult cases underway, but rather peace and stability in the group. Instead of breathing a sigh of relief and crossing your fingers that symptoms of stress never present themselves again, this is now the time to come up with the best plan for how to prevent stress – together.

We can't plan everything, but if we work hard to be clear about guidelines, expectations, agreements and responsibilities, it will be easier for all parties to challenge the avoidance behaviour that is often present when it comes to stress. Instead of "waiting to see", because you're uncertain about the right course of action, it will be easier to act, engage in dialogue and work together on a solution.

In our opinion, the workplace is the best starting point for the efforts that can lead to a significant reduction in widespread stress. And we mean that, despite many people thinking all stress stems from the workplace and that it is a place to go to get rid of the problem. If we can acknowledge and accept that stress requires an interest in the individual person and we begin our work from there, we can go a long way.

Given that stress arises for many different reasons, we need to prevent and deal with different individual solutions too – depending on what the individual stressed person is experiencing. We need to be curious about ourselves and each other and help each other understand what it takes to make a good plan.

## Good discussion topics in peacetime

### → Stress policy

How do you understand stress in the workplace? What is the ambition of the workplace? Do you want to follow the stress-prevention method?

### → Guidelines

Talk about what guidelines you want to have. What do you do when an employee or manager is presenting with symptoms of stress? What opportunities are there for helping and who do you go to?

### → Responsibility

What responsibility do you each have? For example, it could be the employee's responsibility to report openly when symptoms show up, while the manager's responsibility could be to listen openly, to take the symptoms seriously and to help with a plan if an employee comes to them. It's important that everyone accepts that they have a responsibility if stress prevention is to have an effect.

### → Expectations

Write down, too, what expectations you have for each other as employees, colleagues and managers. This also applies to health and safety representatives or union representatives, if there are such people in your workplace. For example, you could talk through and describe how an employee is expected to respond if they notice signs of stress in a colleague. If you've agreed that – as a first step – you can ask if you're worried, it'll be easier to address a colleague showing symptoms of stress and help them more than if it's just up to the individual employee to decide.

# What can I do as an employee?

## Take your symptoms seriously – what are they telling you?

From our years of experience of talking to people who have become ill with stress, we often find that – in hindsight – they can clearly see they've been presenting with signs that something was wrong or out of balance for a while. But, typically, they either didn't have the energy to deal with these signs or didn't know what to do. Time passed and, in the end, they became sick from stress.

Therefore, it's vital that you respond, rather than neglect, when something changes physically and/or mentally. Even if you don't know why it's happening.

Symptoms of stress often creep up over time, which can make it difficult to detect them. When something severe and sudden happens in our lives, we're typically not surprised that we react. But when it comes to a situation that develops slowly, one that may be okay at first but gradually gets worse and worse, it may be more difficult to stop and do something. You might hear yourself say "it'll probably be better tomorrow". You need to respond to these little changes: shallow breathing, discomfort in the body, a distressing thought, not being able to take a break from work, losing overview or making unusually frequent mistakes.

Perhaps you feel guilty and blame yourself for a lot of things and don't feel like being around other people. These are all signals that need to be taken seriously.

## 'Why don't I say stop?'

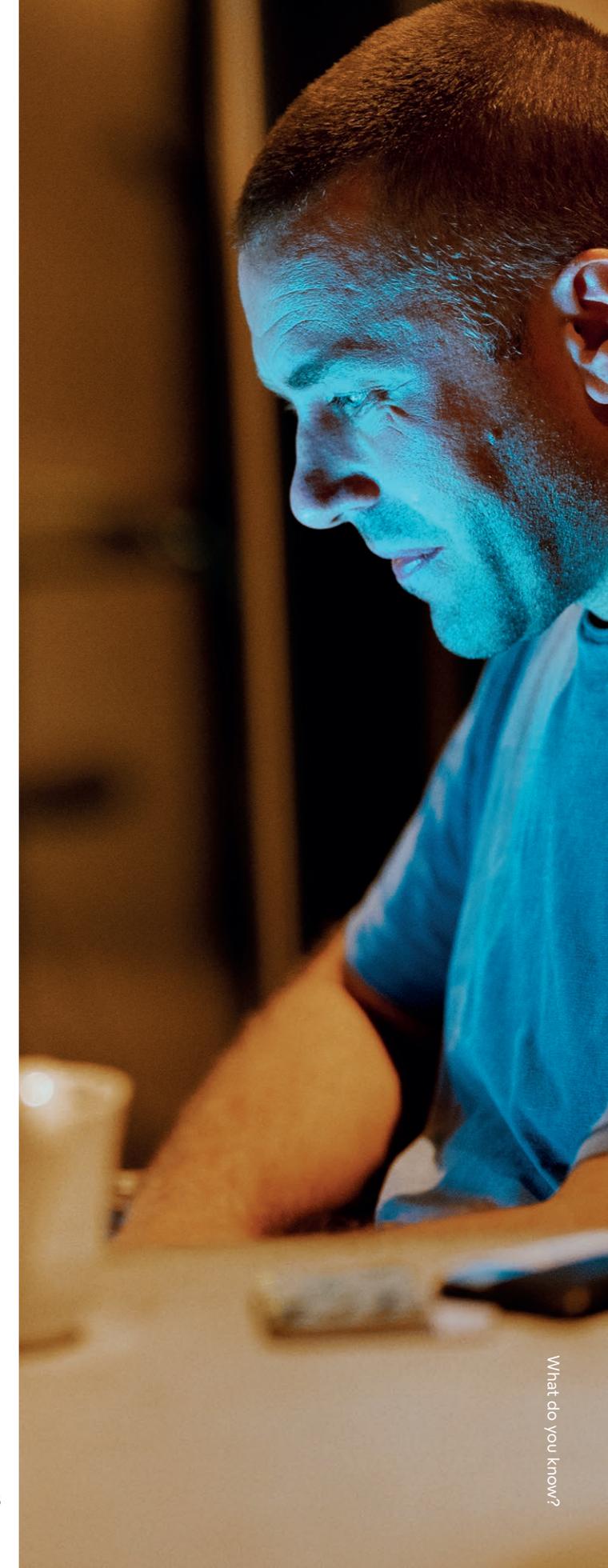
Many people who have been affected by stress blame themselves for not saying stop earlier. "The symptoms were there, so why did I just keep going?"

Humans are good at adapting. This can have a lot of benefits, but when it comes to stress, it can also come with drawbacks. For example, some of the people we talked to described how they got used to having a headache and being tired when they left work. They knew well this shouldn't be the case but couldn't do anything about it here and now. There's just the next deadline to make ...

Starting to present with symptoms of stress is exactly what we need to watch out for. Pay particular attention if you repeatedly hear yourself or a colleague say, "I have a headache, but I'm used to it," or "I have to do something about it, but I just need to get this project done, so it'll have to wait till next week."

## Good advice

- To become more aware of your wellbeing, it's a good idea to look at yourself from the outside from time to time. Use the list of symptoms on page 5 and think about whether you can recognise a few too many of them. How long have you had them? Is it something you've been getting used to?
- If you have symptoms that don't go away on their own, it's a good idea to check if you're taking good enough care of yourself – both at home and at work. Take responsibility for your life functioning as a whole and that your everyday life is sensibly balanced.
- It might also be a good idea to re-search what you're waiting for. Stop and ask yourself what you can do differently today? There's no better time, so think about what you can do here and now.



# What you can do – concrete strategies



Remember: we have a mutual responsibility to look after each other – even when things are moving quickly.

If you want to prevent symptoms of stress, there are several different strategies you can apply. You've probably frequently heard about regular sleep, healthy eating and exercise being important in preventing stress.

This advice is very much in line with your physical condition and is a good guide to ensure you're in balance. But this isn't always enough for avoiding stress and it can be difficult to implement if you're already stressed.

## Six strategies to keep you in balance

### 1. Write it down

Symptoms of stress often occur when we lose both sight of and the experience of being in control. Thoughts and worries whirl around our heads, draining us of energy without us getting anywhere. It can be helpful here, as a challenge, to write down what you experience. Whether in key words or in a longer form – it's entirely up to you. The purpose of writing it down is to get the thoughts and worries out of your head and down on paper. This doesn't remove the problem; rather you distance yourself from it and are better able to put into words and talk about what is putting pressure on you.

### 2. Prioritise

Many people describe how their symptoms of stress began because they had too much to do compared to the amount of time they had available. Everything was equally important; nothing could be left out. A good piece of advice is to write down all your tasks and get help to prioritise. Make a realistic time estimate so you know how long each task will take. This will make it clear to both you and your manager if you're unable to get everything done. It's not always nice to prioritise, but if you're faced with a long to-do list, it's necessary.

### 3. Keep focused on what has value – and spend time on it

If you're in the middle of a busy period, and possibly experiencing the onset symptoms of stress, you may want to reduce as many activities as possible and just rest. But stress management isn't just about cutting back on activities, but also about spending your time in the right way and doing what is valuable to you. For example, if reading a book or going to a football game with your friends is very important for you, it's a good idea that you don't drop it completely during periods of pressure. Because this is also where you get energy. It's about prioritising. Be sure you do what's valuable to you and don't do what drains energy from your life.

Remember: we have a mutual responsibility to look after each other – even when things are moving quickly.

### 4. What strategies do you have? Are they working? If not, then do something else!

What to do if you start showing symptoms of stress? Do you have any particular strategies? For example, some people exercise to keep symptoms at bay. Others practise yoga or mindfulness. There are many good strategies and what works is individual to you. The important thing is being aware of what strategies you have and making sure you put them into play. It's also a good idea to evaluate these strategies every so often. Are they working well enough or do new ones need to be found? For instance, if you tend to run to clear your head when you feel under pressure, but you have a knee injury now, then stop and consider what other strategies you could use.

### 5. Check your assumptions

As humans, we tend to create meaning and correlations in what we experience. For example, perhaps your boss has been short with you, and you may think they're angry about something – or even with you. This is an assumption you can either let run wild in your head as it develops into scary, or you can re-examine it. Perhaps they're under pressure due to budget deadlines. When you're under pressure, you may be more likely to make negative assumptions. So, if a thought or image like this keeps popping up in your head, check to see if there's anything to it.

### 6. Influence versus interest

We're interested in many things – both great and small. What is the weather going to be like on Saturday for the garden party? We tend to spend a lot of thought on picturing and worrying about everything that we're interested in. The challenge is that it's not always something we can influence. What do you think about? Do you use your thoughts to think about things you wish were a particular way, or do you use your thoughts to focus on what you can influence and how you can act? There's a vast difference in the condition they each leave us in. If our thoughts and feelings focus on our interests, where we don't have any influence, it can leave us feeling powerless and with no control. If, however, we're aware of shifting our thoughts to an area where we truly do have influence and we focus on what we can do, then we experience having the power to act and often get better. It demands awareness and practice, but it can be learned by everyone. Think about it – where do you spend most time?

**Managing upwards – helping your manager be a good manager for you**

For many employees, direction in management only goes one way: from manager to employee. Management often improves if we view it as a collaboration. You probably have an idea of what makes a good manager – and of what a good leader is for you, in particular. You're likely to have these expectations met to a greater or lesser extent. If this only happens to a small degree, we suggest that you tell your manager about your expectations or wishes. Your manager may not be able – or willing – to meet all your wishes, but it's always good to balance your expectations. Your manager might not even have thought about what is important to you.

For example, you may need your manager to give you quick advice or make a decision when you find yourself stuck. You can state your need for a sounding board clearly: "It'd be great for me if you could listen briefly to what the problem is and then give me your input, so I can move on. Sometimes, I get stuck on something for too long and it puts pressure on me because then I can't get the rest of my work done. It doesn't have to take long."

You can't assume that your manager knows this is the type of help you need. Your manager may think you would like the freedom to manage your workload yourself and that you don't need help with a specific aspect of your job. In this case, there really isn't much to do to prevent symptoms of stress from arising. It's an example that shows a little effort can make a big difference.

**"What is my responsibility – and how can I collaborate with my manager?"**

Stress prevention in the workplace is largely the responsibility of managers. But if you don't take joint responsibility, that may not be possible.

In the first part of this booklet, we introduced the stress-prevention method. If this really is to work, it's essential that you work together and make it a shared responsibility in the workplace.

A trait of stress and its symptoms is that the external symptoms – the ones your manager and colleagues spot – present themselves only after some time. Your manager may well learn to be aware of any symptoms of stress in you, but that doesn't change that you know best how you feel, and you'll often be the only one to notice the initial symptoms. So, the sooner you say something, the better able you'll be to get help to change the situation. At first, only a little effort is needed to stop a negative development.

Here are our suggestions for how to work with your manager on the stress-prevention method. If you and your manager stick to the structure and the four steps, you'll always know where you are and where you're going, and together you can work purposefully to prevent and challenge any early symptoms of stress.

**Stress prevention pays off**

"Easier said than done," you might think. Well, yes and no. Workplaces that start thinking about symptoms of stress as something that needs to be spotted and dealt with early, and who collaborate based on the stress-prevention method, quickly find that in the beginning only small things are needed to slow down the development of stress. And it doesn't actually take very long once you get started. The difference is that these workplaces spend time on prevention rather than on discontent, dissatisfaction and sick leave. We hope that you and your workplace will spend time on it, too.

For many employees, direction in management only goes one way: from manager to employee. Management often improves if we view it as a collaboration.



## Your responsibility in the stress-prevention method

### → Step 1: Spot it

Help your manager by telling them openly if you have symptoms of stress. Whatever the reason, you can share that you're currently finding it hard to sleep, feel dizzy and have more difficulty than usual remembering things. You don't need to provide long explanations. Just saying that there's something they need to be aware of can be helpful. Your manager may have noticed that something is off, but the sooner you tell them about your symptoms, the sooner you can work together on finding a solution.

### → Step 2: Ask and understand

If you know the cause of your symptoms of stress, it's a good idea to tell your manager about it. If, for example, you're having trouble with a difficult project, you can't expect your manager to understand what's difficult for you and what you find arduous. Your manager may view the situation quite differently and would themselves respond to different factors than you do. If you tell them openly, you can help your manager understand what is putting pressure on you.

Perhaps something at home, that doesn't involve the workplace, is putting you under pressure. Consider how you feel and how it's affecting your performance at work. Is there anything your manager should know? For example, if you have a child who needs you to be present for a period, it may be important that you tell your manager and be honest about the pressure it's putting on you, rather than allow it to appear that the workload is the problem. One solution might be that you're allowed to reduce your hours or workload for a limited period. If you don't tell them what's really pressurising you, you risk your manager misunderstanding both you and the situation and coming up with solutions that have no effect at all on what is perceived as the source of the pressure.

### → Step 3: Find a solution

If you and your manager have a joint understanding of what is putting you under pressure, finding a solution together will be easier. Share your suggestions for something that could help you. Perhaps there are specific things that could change, such as finishing work an hour earlier on Tuesdays, when your son plays football – which always makes you feel under pressure as you fly out the door – in exchange for staying an hour later on Wednesdays. Your manager may not necessarily be able to figure that out. Think about what your manager and workplace can help you with, but also what you could do differently. Just as it's not appropriate for us to spend all our energy on our work, if it leaves us no energy for our private life, neither is it feasible to spend all our energy on our private life if it leaves us none for work. Think about what solution is needed to find the right balance for you.

You may not have a solution yourself. Be honest about it, and it will give your manager an opportunity to put forward their suggestions. There doesn't have to be just one solution and it doesn't have to be perfect. Give it a chance and see if it helps.

### → Step 4: Follow up

Help your manager make sure you follow up on the solution you've found. Is it working as intended? Have you been feeling better and have the symptoms been reduced? If the solution has had no effect, it indicates that another solution should be tried. It's perfectly normal to adjust the solution so you can find what works best.

A good piece of advice is to immediately agree when to follow up. If, for example, you've gone through the above steps and agreed on a solution to try, you can follow up a week later. We recommend that you follow up a few times. They don't have to be long meetings. The most important thing is that you agree on a time to follow up and ensure that it's all going in the right direction.



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