

Velliv



For managers

# 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

PPclinic is a nationwide private psychological and psychiatric clinic that leads the way in stress prevention and the treatment of mental health problems.

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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 much control we feel we have in the situation. If we experience symptoms of stress, we tend to think



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

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, the 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.

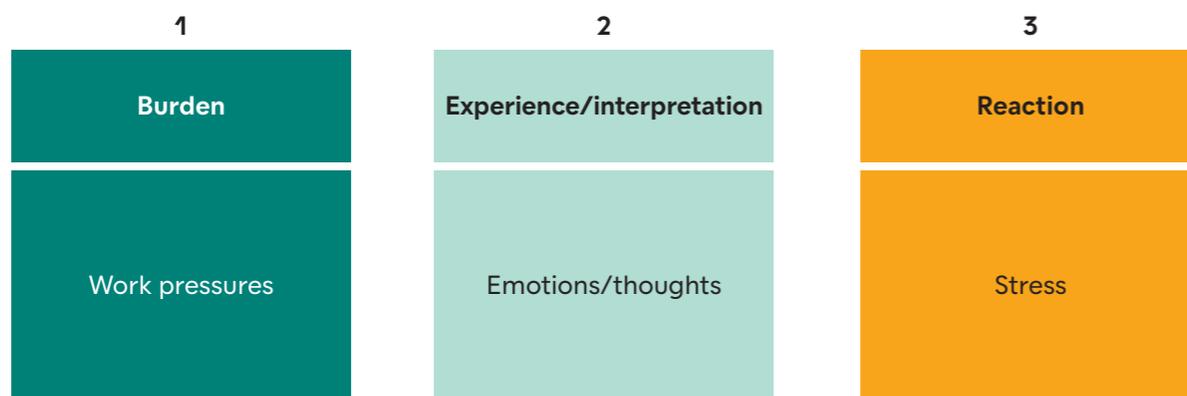
**STEP 2 ASK AND UNDERSTAND** – Be professionally curious and investigate what the signs of stress are really about. Perhaps it's not an external burden, but something else entirely that's at play.

**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, PPublishers, 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?

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.

# Stress prevention management

## Pearls of wisdom – an important foundation

“The 6 pearls of wisdom” from the Danish National Research Centre for the Working Environment (NFA) have long set the framework for how to work on preventing stress in the workplace. And research shows that companies that follow the six nuggets see a difference in the wellbeing and stress levels of employees.

## The 6 pearls of wisdom

1. Influence
2. Social support
3. Reward
4. Predictability
5. Purpose
6. Demand

Source: Tage Søndergaard Christensen, The Danish National Research Centre for the Working Environment.

Overall, it's vital that, as a workplace, you focus on taking as many of these factors as possible into account when it comes to stress prevention. Managers should look at the list and ask themselves what kind

of pearls of wisdom they have in the workplace? Having a few or none at all is a good place to start. However, you can't just sit back if you feel you're in control of most of the nuggets. These pearls of wisdom can get you part of the way and provide a good foundation when it comes to stress prevention, but more is needed. As a manager, you play a crucial role in this work.

## Your role as a manager

As a manager, you play a crucial role for employees. The way you relate is important to how your employees work in the job. You have both a formal and ethical responsibility to keep track of the wellbeing of your employees. And in your role as a manager, you can help create a culture and useful guidelines for how you, as a workplace, prevent stress. Maybe you consider yourself to be, first and foremost, a professional manager, but your interest in your employees, as people, is an important part of the job, even if that's not what you discuss most. When it comes to stress prevention, it is precisely this responsibility and your interest in your team, as both employees and people, that can challenge many managers – how do you enter into a professional dialogue with an employee about something as personal as symptoms of stress? How do you talk to your employees about how they feel – both in the workplace and in general – without being too personal? We'll look at this in more detail.

## The 6 pearls of wisdom

### Influence

Employees have an influence on their work and their working conditions. It could be working hours, with whom they work, the choice of tools or procedures, the organisation of work, the layout of the workplace, etc.

### Social support

Support can be both practical and psychological. The important thing is that it comes at the right time when the employee needs it. Support can come from colleagues and managers alike.

### Reward

Rewards may be salary, acknowledgement or opportunities for development and career in the job. All three types of rewards are important to the individual. It's important that the reward is equal to the effort. Otherwise, it'll be perceived as unfair.

### Predictability

Predictability is about getting the relevant information at the right time. The important thing here is to avoid uncertainty and anxiety in the individual. Predictability is about the big picture, not everyday details.

### Purpose

Employees can see how what they do is related to the overall product. Their work has a purpose in addition to earning them money.

### Demand

Demands can be both work pressure and workload. Here, it's important to find a level that's suitable for the individual employee. There must be neither too much nor too little to do, and it shouldn't be too difficult or too easy either. Finally, demands must be made clear. In addition, employees have to know when the work is completed satisfactorily enough.



### Slight changes in behaviour

As a manager, your job is to pay attention to how your employees are thriving and performing. Keeping track of stress symptoms is a natural part of this, because such symptoms often bring with them dissatisfaction, discontent, frustration and mistakes.

On page 5, we listed the most common symptoms of stress that you need to know about. But, it's important to emphasise that the symptoms in the early phase are far from always visible to others. These are symptoms that the employee feels, and if they don't say anything to you, as a manager, they can be difficult to detect. So, what do you do then? There are probably some visible changes that are a little easier for you to notice. These may be slight, noticeable changes at first, but they can be indicative of developing stress and are, therefore, crucial to notice. Here is a list of the most common behavioural changes.

## BEHAVIOURAL CHANGES (visible to you as a manager)

- Lack of perspective
- Indecision
- Reduced enthusiasm and interest
- Avoidance behaviour
- Withdrawing socially
- Displacement activity
- Tension
- Cynicism and a lack of empathy
- Deteriorating hygiene
- Messy clothing
- Increased use of stimulants, such as coffee, sugar, nicotine and/or alcohol.

When you need to be aware of your employees, you need to look for and notice these behavioural changes first. Such changes don't necessarily mean that anything is wrong – there can be several reasons why an employee's behaviour has changed. However, you may want to keep an eye on these

behavioural changes because they are a sign that something has changed. Keep an eye on them for a few weeks, then talk to the employee if you think it's continuing. Be professionally curious.

### Professional curiosity – what is it?

Professional curiosity is a way of asking employees about their wellbeing, without interpreting or construing what you hear. You're not judgemental and you don't try to solve their problems either; you're simply trying to gain a better understanding of your employee's experience. Whether you share the experience with the employee or not, the goal is to see the world from their perspective. This gives you better prerequisites for finding a solution together with the employee later.

For example, perhaps the employee feels there is too much to do, but you know the employee doesn't have that much of a workload. It's about stepping back from what you know – and the feelings it may evoke in you – when an employee, whom you assess has ample time, complains about the things they have to do. The focus is on finding out what is making the employee feel like they can't do their job. Is there something else that is putting pressure on the employee?

Being professionally curious means staying in your managerial role. You're not the employee's friend or confidant; rather, in your role as manager, you're looking into how you can understand and further help the employee. You take each employee seriously, but don't forget about your responsibilities to colleagues, the workplace and your core work.

### The difference between private and work-related causes

Is it relevant to distinguish between private and work-related causes of stress? Yes and no. It's not important in terms of whether you have to do something or not. But it is important for what you have to do. Whether or not an employee is under pressure and stressed over something work-related or in their private life or, as is often the case, a combination of the two, it's in your interest, as a manager, to help them. If the employee is having difficulty keeping it together, it ultimately has an impact on productivity and, thereby, the company's results. Most companies also want to help their employees thrive at work as well as at home.



The focus is on finding out what is making the employee feel like they can't do their job. Is there something else that is putting pressure on the employee?

If the employee is facing particular challenges at work, then, as a manager, it's your job to discuss it more in-depth and get an overview of what is putting pressure on the employee. It may just be about getting clearer direction and prioritising. Perhaps the employee needs to be shielded from certain work duties for a period of time, needs help with resolving a collaboration conflict or something else entirely.

If the issue is more private in nature, your job, as a manager, is to talk about how it's affecting their work and looking at whether something in the framework can be adjusted for a period, so the employee is better able to cope with their private problems. Perhaps the employee can be helped professionally through HR and/or an insurance scheme. You're not the person the employee should use to deal with their private problems, but in many cases, it's nice for the employee to be able to share what is going wrong and avoid misunderstandings. This also makes it easier for you to help find a practical solution.

#### Stay on the riverbank

If you're going to help your employees with professional curiosity and good solutions, and if you're going to succeed in stopping the stress symptoms, it's crucial you're not torn by your own feelings or opinions. We've borrowed a term that we call "staying on the riverbank" from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, as it illustrates very nicely the situation you often face, as a manager, when an employee gets into difficulty.

Imagine standing on the bank of a river. The employee is down in the water. The river represents everything that is happening to the employee – thoughts, feelings, physical experiences. The current whirls them around; it's strong and increases every day as you watch it. The employee needs you. The water gushes around them. They feel they have lost control of their everyday life and can't reach the shore on their own. It's also difficult for them to navigate while they are in the river. They have difficulty seeing which bank is closest. They make irrational decisions. They may even swim in the wrong direction.

To help the employee, you must remain standing on the riverbank. Your employee needs your overview, your leadership and your management. It can be challenging to stay there. Your intuition tells you to



If your employee is in a difficult situation, don't 'jump in the river'. Stay on the riverbank – from there you can keep overview, focus and offer the best help.

jump into the river, and you're probably even getting 'invitations' to do so. Perhaps the employee's behaviour evokes emotions in you – these could be compassion, irritation or other emotions. Feelings that tempt you to jump into the river without yourself being aware of it – this is your own intuitive reaction. The employee can have feelings, such as anger and fear – strong emotions that affect those close by. But if you do become affected by their feelings, you will immediately end up like your employee: a whirl of negative emotions and irrational thoughts. We often only see this first when we have already jumped from the bank and are in the river with the employee. And this can lead to reproach, distrust, pity, misunderstanding and much more.

Try to retain the image of standing on the riverbank when talking to your employees. It will help keep you focused and keep your own thoughts and feelings in check, so you can be professional and offer the right help. It's easier to stand on the riverbank when you yourself are in balance and not splashing around in your own river.

As a manager, it's essential that you have solid ground under your feet if you're to be able to prevent stress symptoms from developing in your employees. At the same time, being a manager doesn't make you immune to the symptoms of stress. Be aware of yourself and what strategies you use to prevent stress. Talk to your colleagues in management or your own manager about how you can help each other prevent stress, too.

### Be aware of yourself and what strategies you use to prevent stress:

- How am I feeling? Look at the list of symptoms on page 5. Are there any you can tick?
- Who is my sounding board when I need to talk about my challenges?
- Who'll help me come ashore if I fall in the river?



#### **How do you invite an employee in to talk?**

We meet many managers who would like to talk to their employees, but who are uncertain about how to invite them in to talk. As mentioned in the introduction, it's crucial that good guidelines be laid in peacetime. If you've never spoken about you, as a manager, wanting to talk about the early symptoms of stress, it can be difficult to start. The individual employee, who you suddenly invite in for a chat, can quickly conjure up worrying scenarios about why you're asking them.

It's preferable to invite them in to talk during peacetime before the problem arises. Tell them openly about how you'd like to work together to identify early symptoms of stress, so you can tackle them before they develop. Tell them your goal is to be professionally curious, so as to offer employees the best possible help in finding a solution. Ask for feedback so you can become the best possible manager for your employees.

Sometimes, as a workplace, we don't have time to have this talk during peacetime, but only when we're facing a specific stressful challenge – for example, when one or more colleagues are already on sick leave. It can make it a little harder for employees to hear the message of what you, the manager, are saying, because they're preoccupied

with the specific challenging situation. However, this doesn't change your announcement, as a manager, calling for dialogue and a joint search for a solution. If you have employees who are already presenting with symptoms of stress, it may be important to talk to them individually and be clear about how you want to work on a constructive plan.

Dealing with a current stress problem may well be the first step to a good plan for future prevention. You can take the lead in a concrete case and demonstrate how to invite someone to talk and how you can work together to find and try out solutions. This can help create confidence within the staff group; everyone can see how you, as a manager, handle the problem, and when they know what to expect, it makes it easier for them to come to you to talk.

Inviting an employee in to talk doesn't mean you can offer all the help and support your employee needs. You're still a manager with responsibility for each individual employee, your colleagues, the department, the workplace and, not least, your core business. Dialogue, however, allows you to talk openly about what is wanted, what is possible, what requirements are needed and what expectations you have of each other.

#### **Be aware of your own avoidance behaviour**

Reading the above, you may think that you know most of it. And you want to act on it too – just not today. Having to talk to an employee who is going through a hard time, with so many emotions and thoughts at play, isn't always easy. So, we often tend to postpone and avoid difficult conversations – as both colleagues and managers.

However, if, as a manager, you are to make a difference, it's vital that you challenge your own avoidance behaviour and engage in dialogue with the employee you're worried about. Even if it's difficult. Be mindful of when your own avoidance behaviour causes you to postpone a meeting – do it today rather than tomorrow!



**Be mindful of when your own avoidance behaviour causes you to postpone a meeting – do it today rather than tomorrow!**

## Your responsibility in the stress-prevention method

Stress prevention in the workplace is largely a manager's responsibility. But, if employees don't take co-responsibility, this may not be possible. We introduced the stress-prevention method earlier in the booklet. If this is really going to work, it's essential that you work together in the workplace and make it a joint responsibility.

The stress-prevention method is our suggestion for how you can work together to prevent stress. As a manager, you can use it to clearly explain how you would like to work, what you want to try and where you need your employees' contributions. If you adhere to the structure and the four steps, you'll always know where you are and where you're going, and you can work together purposefully to prevent and respond to early symptoms of stress.

### → Step 1: Spot it

Get to know the most common symptoms of stress (p. 5) as well as typical behavioural changes (p. 14), and practise spotting them in your employees. Tell them in advance that you'll be aware of these changes and that employees can expect you to come to them if you notice something that worries you or makes you wonder. Invite your employees to come to you first if they begin to experience symptoms of stress. It allows you to intervene much earlier.

### → Step 2: Ask and understand

If you've spotted a change in behaviour in an employee, you can openly say: "I may be mistaken, but I've noticed that..." Perhaps you've noticed that the employee doesn't eat lunch with their colleagues, seems tired, makes a lot of mistakes, seems frustrated or such like. Invite the employee in to talk about how things are going and how the employee is doing. Is there anything you should know to better understand the situation? Is there anything affecting their work?

Be professionally curious. Park your interpretations, explanations and instant solution. Listen and find out what it's all about. You may not agree. You may feel something doesn't add up. Stay on the riverbank and try to step into your employee's shoes. Sometimes, you'll want to move quickly to a solution, but try to stay on this step a little longer, so you're sure you haven't overlooked anything.

Some employees will deny that there's something wrong – even when presenting with symptoms of stress. Accept that the employee doesn't agree with what you see, or doesn't want to share it with you, and invite them to a follow-up chat to talk about how things are going. Often, the fact that, as a manager, you're asking about them will cause the employee to think about their condition, take it seriously and act on it.

### → Step 3: Find a solution

Once you've talked about what is putting the employee under pressure, you can begin to explore what solutions might be helpful. For example, if private circumstances are putting pressure on the employee, so they're having difficulty getting all their work done, perhaps they could use some of their holidays for a limited period or could work a day at the weekend for time in lieu. Perhaps they should also travel less than usual for work for a while.

Solutions depend much on the problem and on what is possible for the workplace. Invite the employee to come up with suggestions for what might be helpful. Sometimes, the employee doesn't have any suggestions, so it would be good for you to have some. The most important thing is that you talk about what can be done and find a solution that is regarded as helpful for the employee and is realistic and possible for the workplace. And remember: major changes don't always have to be made if you intervene early.

### → Step 4: Follow up

Once you've found a solution, it's a good idea to decide immediately when you're going to follow up. You don't have to set aside an hour for follow-up, but it's important you make sure that the chosen solution is having an effect. If not, work on adjusting it or finding a completely different solution. It's a good idea that, as the manager, you make sure to take responsibility for the follow-up. Most employees will already feel bad about putting you out. Following up demonstrates that you're taking the problem seriously and want to see the solution through.

### Start small

"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.



**Don't worry about a chronic state  
of stress coming out of the blue  
– it doesn't.**



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