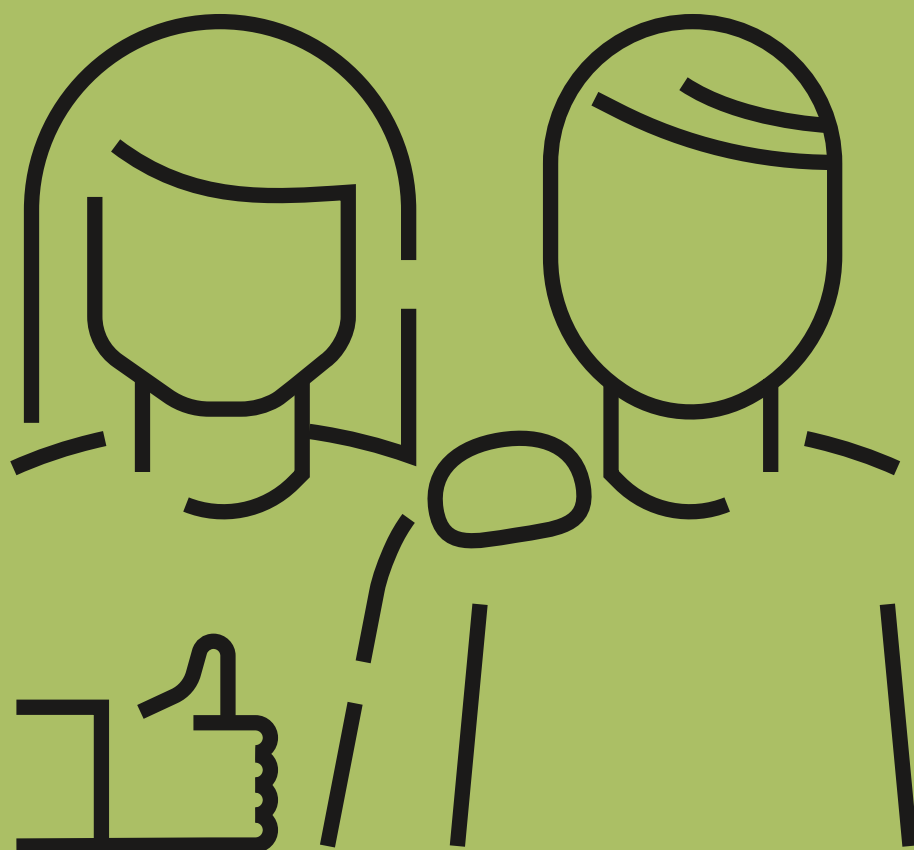


Guide for managers on managing stress in the workplace



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Preventing stress at SDU

The psychosocial work environment has a major impact on employees' well-being and mental health. When the conditions are right, sick absence tends to drop, the quality of task execution improves and productivity increases. Ensuring good mental health in the workplace requires a systematic multi-level approach and continuous follow-up. While management sets the framework, a safe environment is created collaboratively by managers and employees and fosters curiosity and respect for different perspectives.

SDU bases its approach on the requirements of the Danish Working Environment Act: work must be planned, organised and carried out so that the impact on the psychosocial work environment is fully defensible in terms of health and safety, both in the short and long term. This is supported by Section 5 of the Executive Order on Psychosocial Working Environment. The employer has the overall responsibility for ensuring that working conditions are safe and for creating a framework in which stress is prevented and handled systematically (Sections 15, 38, 42 of the Working Environment Act). As a supervisor, you must therefore actively contribute to ensuring that health and safety measures work as intended and are adjusted when changes are made (Section 26 of the Danish Working Environment Act).

This guide describes the manager's role in stress prevention.

The manager's role in prevention

The manager's role in stress prevention is about creating a culture in which well-being is an integral part of working life. This requires relational skills, organisational understanding, courage and the confidence to talk about difficult matters.

According to the research project 'Ledelse, kerneopgave, arbejdsfællesskaber og stress' (Leadership, core task, working communities and stress) by Pernille Steen Pedersen (CBS), it is crucial that managers create a work environment where employees dare to show vulnerability and speak openly about doubt and inadequacy.

For the manager, part of prevention is ensuring the balance between demands and resources and keeping a finger on the pulse of daily life, for example through 1:1 conversations.

An important preventive measure can be to work purposefully with the stress ladder and the **6 Pearls of Wisdom** (Danish: De 6 guldorn).

Read more here (in Danish): https://www.lederne.dk/-/media/files/guides/min-ledelse/stressguide_forebyggelse.pdf

The 6 Pearls of Wisdom

1. Influence on your own work

Each employee has a say in their own work and the conditions under which it is carried out. This may include the working hours, who you work with, choice of tools or procedures, work organisation, workplace layout, etc.

2. Meaning in work

It is clear how your efforts relate to the overall product. Also, the meaning of one's work goes beyond making money. This is also where values and goals come into play.

3. Predictability

Predictability is about getting the right information at the right time. The important thing here is to avoid uncertainty and anxiety. You are not supposed to be able to predict the details of everyday work. Predictability is all about the big picture.

4. Social support

Support can be both practical and mental. The important thing is that it is provided when needed. Both colleagues and managers can provide support.

5. Reward

It is important that the reward matches the effort. Otherwise it will be perceived as unfair. Rewards can be salary, reputation and appreciation, or opportunities for development and career advancement related to the job. All three forms of reward matter to employees.

6. Job demands

Job demands include both quantitative and qualitative requirements. The quantitative requirements must be appropriate. This means you should have neither too much to do nor too little. The qualitative requirements must also fit the person. The work should be neither too difficult nor too easy. Perhaps 'a little too difficult' is the best approach. Finally, the requirements must be clear. You need to know when the job is done satisfactorily.

Stress is not only a matter of workload, but also the feeling of being alone with problems and shame associated with a sense of inadequacy. Stress is often a stress reaction to dysfunctional organisational structures. For example: unrealistic demands and expectations in task performance, unclear roles in work and collaboration, major or minor changes, high complexity in task performance, difficult collaboration or a high degree of unpredictability.

Stress is an invisible health issue. Employees vary in their ability to express how they are feeling. The employee's trust in their manager also affects how much they dare to open up and provide the necessary information. It is essential that the manager can describe what they have observed in the employee; and then the employee has the opportunity to verify the manager's observations. In this way, you can create space for dialogue in a vulnerable situation.

Make sure to put stress on the agenda so that constructive agreements can be made before problems arise.

Feedback is Important!

In preventive work, providing feedback to employees plays a central role in the leadership task – regardless of whether the dialogue is with permanent or temporary staff – be it academic or technical/administrative staff.

As a manager, you might consider:

When do you motivate your employees and when do you demotivate them? In what context does it happen?

How can I listen more attentively and gain a better understanding of the employee's world and perspective? Have I had a basic conversation with employees about what good feedback is?

Have I communicated the intentions and desires of the feedback? Have I clarified with the employee what the expectations are for the work tasks? Has the employee expressed that they can vouch for the work tasks? Is there a mismatch between values and the ability to work according to them?

Consider where the employee is solely responsible and when you as a manager should step in and take over the task and responsibility. Or help with prioritising tasks.

Use short daily check-ins to catch work overload in a timely manner.

Take signals seriously, even the small ones.

The manager's role when employees are under the influence of stress, but are not on sick leave

It is important that the manager shows professional curiosity – that is, asking about the employee's well-being without overstepping personal boundaries – in order to uncover any stressors at work. The manager's responsibility is to prevent and manage stress. Therefore, it is also the manager's job, together with the employee, to identify the factors that cause stress and to help reorganise the work if necessary. Employees should never be solely responsible for solving problems, but it is often beneficial for them to have a say in the solution.

In addition to being curious and listening, the manager must also be ready to take action by acting on the employee's feedback about what creates imbalance. This can make the employee realise that they are not solely responsible for the situation and the experience of the stress reaction. It is important for the manager to follow up on conversations and dialogue, even when an immediate solution isn't available.

When the employee is burdened by work, but not on sick leave with stress.

If the employee expresses sub-optimal task performance, it is important that you as a manager show care and curiosity and avoid trivialising the employee's experiences. For example:

- 1. Listen to the employee's experience of the challenges. For instance, you might ask 'How does it affect your everyday life?' 'Do you know how long it has affected you?' 'Can you suggest a change we can make relatively quickly?' 'I suggest that...'*
- 2. Follow up on agreements and take stock, e.g. 'How are things going now?' 'Is there a need for changes or new measures?'*

If the employee does not want your help, you need to clearly communicate your expectations and ultimately consider whether you should use your management rights to communicate your desired changes. It is important that this is done openly and transparently so that the employee understands both the reason for and the consequences of the decision. Remember that the employee also has a responsibility to follow the instructions given according to the IGLO model. Read more about this at feedwork.dk

If you assess that the situation warrants it, you can escalate the issue to the health and safety organisation, which has greater decision-making authority. By doing so, you contribute to identifying organisational challenges and give your manager a clearer picture of employee concerns.

It is also important that the manager communicates the direction and goals of the work: Where are we heading? What help or support is needed for the individual employee? The manager must also align expectations with individual goals, prioritisation and criteria of success. This helps ensure that the employee is met with recognition and a respectful approach to their work and professional expertise. At the same time, it allows managers to prevent unsuccessful organisational structures and intervene when employees experience an imbalance between demands and resources.

Address the issue early – don't wait for a sickness note

For example

- Observe changes in behaviour (e.g. fatigue, irritability, decreased performance). Share them with the employee. Ask more in-depth questions.
- Actively listen and acknowledge the problem without trivialising or explaining it.
- Support for customising tasks and frameworks.
- Use health and safety representatives (HSRs) and union representatives (URs) to ensure that the work environment supports well-being. Engage in constructive dialogue about work-related stressors before they turn into well-being challenges and ensure that efforts are tailored to the specific work environment. Use workplace assessment timelines and action plans to actively work and follow up on health, safety and well-being whenever significant changes occur in employees' work tasks and when something is identified as impacting well-being – not just every three years during the workplace assessment.
- Internal help (HR) (if necessary, consult HR before engaging with the employee) or external counselling (e.g. psychologist via health care plan/Falck).
- Colleagues can, if relevant and agreed with the employee, relieve or support the employee in their work.
- Work to ensure transparency and fairness in the team.

The colleague role

As a colleague, you can be a contributing factor to a safe work environment by providing collegial social support and care:

Express your concern for your colleague if you observe behavioural changes and let them know what you are experiencing. Support your colleague in approaching the health and safety group (HSG) or their manager.

The employee carries some responsibility if they refuse help, but you should continue to reach out to them. If it is agreed in the department and the rejection continues, it is OK to express your concerns directly to the manager.

The role of an employee representative

The HSR/UR can facilitate conversations about well-being and stress to make it easier for employees to discuss challenges and imbalances. Employee representatives are also a link to management and can articulate non-functioning structures and frameworks for work.

Follow up on the conversations:

1. Adjust tasks and expectations
2. A concrete initiative could be to review the employee's tasks together.
3. Prioritise and delegate tasks. Contribute to organising the work.
4. Get an overview of deadlines and collaborators. Are any of the collaborators uncoordinated?
5. Customise working hours or flexibility temporarily.

According to Lederne (The Danish Association of Managers and Executives) and research from Det Nationale Forskningscenter for Arbejdsmiljø (The National Research Centre for the Working Environment), it is crucial that managers:

1. Foster psychological safety where it is legitimate to talk about stress.
2. Have ongoing conversations about well-being, not just when problems arise. Make constructive agreements before problems arise.
3. Be aware of organisational causes of stress, such as unclear goals, too many tasks or poor communication.

Summary: The manager's action steps

Observe and react in a timely manner.

Have an open and supportive conversation.

Involve HR and health care plans if applicable. Get support and input.

Customise tasks and expectations.

Follow up regularly on whether agreements are being honoured and document agreements made between manager and employee.

The manager's role if the employee goes on sick leave

Employee stress is a difficult challenge that managers must address. No two stress-related sick leaves are the same. Stress is not just an automatic reaction to an imbalance between stresses and resources. It is the perceived imbalance that matters, which means there can be considerable individual variation in when severe stress develops.

Therefore, the focus should be on the individual employee when they return to work after a stress-related sick leave.

Read more here (in Danish): https://www.fagperson.regionshospitalet-goedstrup.dk/siteassets/01.-afdelinger/arbejdsmedicin/forskning/forskningsprojekter/tema_psykisk-arbejdsmiljo/stressforebyggelse_anbefalinger-til-ledere_2018.pdf

Line manager of the employee affected by stress

Mandatory conversation about sickness absence

It is required that a sickness absence conversation be held between the employee's personnel manager and the employee no later than four weeks after the first day of sickness absence. Find the conversation template here: **Sickness conversation**

If the line manager is a contributing factor to the sick leave, the employee can contact their HSR who can help address the challenge, e.g. to the union representative. The employee may also contact their UR directly or a manager further up in the system, such as the line manager's manager.

Recommendations for the personnel manager

1. Get in touch with the employee on sick leave. Agree with the employee how their sick leave can be communicated to colleagues, and whether the employee wants contact with colleagues during the sick leave. Ask if there is anything you can do and if the professional help is sufficient. It is important that the employee is met with understanding and feels that efforts are being made to help them return to work. If internal assistance from HR or Falck is involved, there is an option for a third-party meeting with the psychologist.
2. Keep in touch during sick leave, but on the employee's terms. The focus should be on how management can support the employee to return to work. This could take the form of a brief email or a follow-up call. Agree with the employee about how best to handle the contact. Make sure the conversation is not about work-related topics or workplace challenges.
3. Empathise with and respect the employee's situation without making it too personal or invasive.
4. When the employee is deemed ready, a start date is set. The date is always set by the doctor or psychologist. Be aware that the employee may feel nervous when agreeing on a return-to-work date.
5. Make a realistic plan for returning to the workplace – preferably together with the psychologist.
6. Read more in the guide 'Efter stress – om at komme tilbage på arbejde efter stress' (After stress – returning to work after stress) (In Danish) and find help to create a start-up plan.
7. Follow up on the plan, preferably weekly, and adjust if necessary.

As a **manager**, you can **show empathy with** and **respect for the employee's situation** in the following ways:

Make sure the employee receives support during sick leave. Make sure to quickly inform about the options offered by SDU (Falck Healthcare psychologist scheme and internal HR consultants):

Show understanding without digging: Avoid asking about private details.

Instead, you can say:

"I can hear this is affecting you – I'll look into how we can ease the pressure in your workday when you return. I'll inform you about this before your start date."

Focus on the work environment: Steer the conversation towards what can be changed at work. For example:

"Are there any specific tasks or situations that feel particularly stressful and are best avoided? My suggestion is..."

Offer support and follow-up: Ask if the employee wants help – e.g. from HR or a colleague, or by changing their tasks.

"Would it make sense for us to talk to HR together – or would you like me to explore some options for you?"

Advisory support and guidance are key

SDU HR, Work Environment & Development is responsible for advising on the prevention and management of work environment challenges. Among other things, SDU HR can help manage stress in the individual employee resulting from, for instance, a high complexity of tasks or stress triggered by a poor relationship with the manager.

You can also reach out to the HSG or UR, who are bound by duty of confidentiality and can assess the situation and assist the employee/manager in taking the next steps.

Help with prevention

As a manager, you can find inspiration for working preventively with stress in collaboration with the health and safety group in the guide 'Arbejdsmiljøgruppens forebyggende arbejde med stress' (The health and safety group's preventive work with stress) at www.sdunet.dk/arbejdsmiljoe.

Literature (in Danish only)

Opstartsplan: Efter stress? – om at komme tilbage på arbejde efter stress.

https://www.regionshospitalet-goedstrup.dk/globalassets/allepatientinformationer/rhg/afdelinger/arbejdsmedicin/tilbage-til-arbejde-efter-stress/print-vores-gronne-pjece/efter-stress_oktober2023.pdf

”Stop stress – håndbog for ledere” Malene Friis Andersen og Marie Kingston, Klim 2016 (blev valgt til årets lederbog i 2016)

”Nye perspektiver på stress” red. Malene Friis Andersen og Svend Brinkmann klim. 2013

BFA – Velfærd og Offentlig administration:

<https://www.godtarbejds miljo.dk/>

The National Research Centre for the Working Environment:

<https://nfa.dk/>