

Stress Guide for Leaders

Avoid stress both for yourself
and your colleagues



Introduction

Mental Health Experts at Dansk Sundhedssikring prepared this guide to help you identify and manage the stress symptoms of both you and your employees. It will also help you gain an increased awareness of stress within your department. You will acquire knowledge and tools to safeguard your own and your team's mental health.

This guide will educate you on the nature of stress, the triggers you need to recognise, strategies for managing them, and the creation of concrete action plans so that stress symptoms do not escalate into serious illness.

Middle-level managers can use this guide if their company doesn't have specific procedures for stress management or they can use it as a supplement if their company already has existing regulations. This guide can also be used to formulate internal procedures for stress management at the employee, manager, group and company level.

Stress must be resolved cooperatively. Therefore, the first critical step is that you and your organisation decide to openly acknowledge and discuss stress. It's a myth that stress symptoms become worse by talking about them.

You can use this guide and the tools presented to get started. In addition, you can consult the following guide, which contains concrete tools tailored at the individual level: "Stress – Get off to a Good Start"

[Stress – Get off to a Good Start](#) [Go to →](#)

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Healthy and unhealthy stress

In many workplaces, stress is an escalating problem that is consistently on the corporate agenda. It is a challenge that demands action at the individual, group and company level. As a result, you as a manager, play a decisive role in managing stress – both your own and that of your employees.

The Danish Health Authority cautions that stress is one of the most prevalent work-related health problems in the European Union and that we all share a responsibility to better manage it. In the academic literature, stress is defined as an imbalance in the interplay between stressors, work and an individual's perception of their available inner reserves. When stress exceeds inner reserves, well-being is jeopardised*.

Within the Danish labour market, many individuals experience short-term stress symptoms, particularly when faced with new or difficult challenges. Short-term stress often elicits an array of physical, psychological and behavioural reactions. These reactions serve a beneficial purpose by heightening the senses and enabling an ability to cope with and overcome a new challenge. This is an entirely natural and healthy response which temporarily boosts one's inner resources. The nervous system reacts automatically to address the task or challenge at hand.

In cases of prolonged stress, the nervous system and the brain must be given the opportunity to recharge and rejuvenate – every time. Recovery is just as important as overcoming the challenge confronted.

But if the strain lasts for weeks or months without respite, it can develop into chronic stress, which can be harmful. It can have major consequences for both the individual and the company and, worst-case scenario, lead to long-term sick leave.

Chronic stress must be taken seriously and managed so that it doesn't develop into serious illness. As a manager, it is your responsibility to respond if you identify any signs or symptoms of stress. The ideal is to prevent its development, regardless of a particular individual's stress level.

As a manager, you must proactively tackle your own stress before you can help your team. The first step is to become aware of your own inner reserves, reduce long-term stressors and understand the options for recovery.

You can compare stress to having ten water taps on at full blast for several weeks. To prevent the water from running dry, you must reduce the flow or completely turn off some of the taps until the water is replenished.

* Source: Post.doc. Pernille Steen Pedersen, Department of Business Humanities, CBS



Your well-being as a manager

Did you know that your own stress level and the way you manage it directly impacts your employees? According to a 2021 survey published by the Danish Association of Managers and Executives, one in four managers constantly or frequently experience stress. *

Stress affects your capacity for empathy as well as your interpersonal skills, thus making it harder to understand and monitor both yourself and your team. If you are stressed yourself, you will find it more difficult to create an attractive and well-functioning workplace. This can have repercussions for productivity and well-being in your department, including the ability to retain valuable employees (Danish Association of Managers and Executives).

Clearly, there are several compelling reasons why you should address stress triggers and maintain a healthy equilibrium in your efforts to prevent stress.

Managing your own stress

Some managers may mistakenly believe that being busy and experiencing stress is part of their job, which is why they may wait too long before acting. This approach is risky – not just for you as a manager, but also for the employees you supervise and, ultimately, for the company. You need to become familiar with your own stress triggers and to regularly monitor yourself so that you know when and how to adjust.

Experiencing one or more symptoms for short periods of time is normal. It's not dangerous or a cause for alarm – unless you fail to use these symptoms as guidance towards achieving a sustainable balance between the demands of your job and your inner reserves.

In later sections of this guide, you will be introduced to common stress symptoms. Please master them so that you can monitor your own situation and support your team. Pay attention to how many symptoms you recognise in yourself and how long they have persisted. There must be a balance between your inner reserves and your stressors. If there is not, it is essential that you make some adjustments.

You now know that it is a mistake to ignore chronic stress and that major or minor adjustments must be made. This applies to both your professional and your personal life. While stress is an individual experience, it must be resolved cooperatively in the workplace.

There may be a need for advice from external mentors with experience in management and stress. A good place to start is your own manager or your company's HR department, if this is where you feel most comfortable finding support. You may also know other managers who are experienced with stress management. Ask them for help in providing clarity and creating a plan.

If you are stressed, it can be valuable to your employees to lead by example. You can openly communicate how you are feeling and the strategies you have implemented to recover. You will send a strong signal to your team that, at times, anyone can be affected by stress and that there is a way out.

Addressing well-being and stress in your department



Competent management is inextricably linked to prioritising well-being, including stress prevention. Studies indicate that managers often feel ill-prepared to prevent and resolve problems within the psychological work environment (Ladegaard et al, 2017, Dewe & Driscoll, 2002). When a manager doesn't feel equipped for the task, the situation may get worse.

You can significantly strengthen your own leadership skills by acquiring the necessary expertise and the practical tools to address mental health. This will provide you with a more nuanced understanding and an enhanced skill set to promote employee well-being, manage stress and enhance productivity (Copenhagen Think Tank for Sustainable Working Life).

As a manager, you must take the lead in creating a healthy work environment for your team. Your leadership plays a central role in your employees' professional lives and their overall well-being. The dynamics between you and your team and the way you organise yourselves, are reflected in your department's productivity and the company's bottom line. As highlighted in the introduction, it is imperative that you take the opportunity to examine and discuss the work culture, the work environment, well-being, and how everyone in the department relates to stress.

* <https://www.lederne.dk/presse-og-nyheder/analyser-og-undersogelser/ledere-og-ledelse/hver-fjerde-leder-doejer-med-stress>

Action no. 1:

Deepen your understanding

01

What is the current state of well-being and stress within your team? To gain an understanding, you can answer this question in the relevant section at the back of this guide. Feel free to use data from the latest workplace assessments, summaries of employment reviews, employer net promoters scores, sickness absentee rates and/or notes from sick leave/manager-employee interviews. In order to achieve as objective an assessment as possible, use data from the last six months to a year.

By writing down these findings, you can create greater clarity and identify any trends. Then, grade these trends on a scale of 0-10, where 0 represents relatively minor trends, and 10 represents very serious ones. This will provide you with an indication of when and how you need to take action.

Be as objective as possible when completing this exercise. Please be aware of your own biases and perspectives so that they do not affect the analysis. Once you have this information, you can identify the most pressing issues and begin addressing them within your department.

When you discover easily achievable goals, you can address them immediately. Small adjustments that are easy to implement often yield significant results and demonstrate managerial competence. For example, you could strengthen informal relationships within your department, including your employees' relationship with you. This is an important element in fostering trust within the department. Talk to your employees about their weekend at the coffee machine and be present for the small opportunities for contact that arise throughout the day.

Discuss stress openly

There are still workplaces in which talking about stress is met with disapproval, bordering on taboo. Some corporate executives may fear that publicly discussing stress will increase their employees' stress levels. The truth is that the path towards prevention is expedited when there is greater company knowledge about stress and well-being.

There may be uncertainty about how to approach the issue, or there may be an assumption that employees are adults who are capable of reporting any challenges themselves. Regardless of the obstacles you may face, competent leadership means taking responsibility.

Talking publicly and candidly about stress and well-being in the company demonstrates that the issue is taken seriously and that it is part of the company culture. This approach allows for the establishment of a shared understanding and a common course of action. It is absolutely essential in preventing healthy stress developing into chronic stress, long-term sick leave and job dissatisfaction.

Experience indicates that both managers and employees may find it difficult to discuss stress. Often a strong sense of shame is involved and some may feel as if they are the only ones who cannot cope with pressure at work. Addressing the issue can be overwhelming. Some managers may perceive it as a vulnerability to have their employees experiencing unhealthy stress responses.

As a manager, you must be mindful of this, both in relation to yourself and to your team. A feeling of shame must not be a reason to avoid addressing the challenges of stress.

Are there any signs of stress among your employees?

Symptoms of stress typically accumulate over a prolonged period. Their resolution also takes time. When an employee starts to lose their equilibrium, it is necessary to recognise the problem so that action can be taken. Below you will find the symptoms to keep an eye on, if an employee contacts you or even if they don't. Remember that it is important to initiate a dialogue before problems arise.



Pay attention to any negative changes in functional performance:

01

Job assignments and deadlines.

Is the quality and efficiency of work consistent with the usual standard?

02

Changes in private life.

Are there any relationship challenges with a partner, parents, and/or children? Are such challenges affecting the employees' ability to work?

03

Daily life.

Is it challenging to show up on time, commute, take care of daily chores? Is sick leave frequently taken?

Symptoms

You should take action when symptoms have persisted for more than two to three weeks. Symptoms can manifest themselves both physically and psychologically, and can vary in severity. Stress is a unique experience for each individual, so the better you know your employees, the easier it is to pinpoint when to react. It is important to note changes. Not everyone is equally forthcoming, and that is ok. But if there is a change, it may be something you should talk to the individual about.

Mood and behaviour

- Are there changes in the employee's mood? For instance, increased depression or a shorter temper than usual?
- Does the employee seem more worried, tense or anxious than usual?
- Are there any changes in the way he or she interacts with you or colleagues?
- Are there changes in the quality of work produced? Are there problems with prioritising tasks?
- Is there a diminished interest in assignments that the employee previously enjoyed?
- Does the employee tend to withdraw from the company of others compared to before?
- Has there been an increase in sick leave?

Sleep

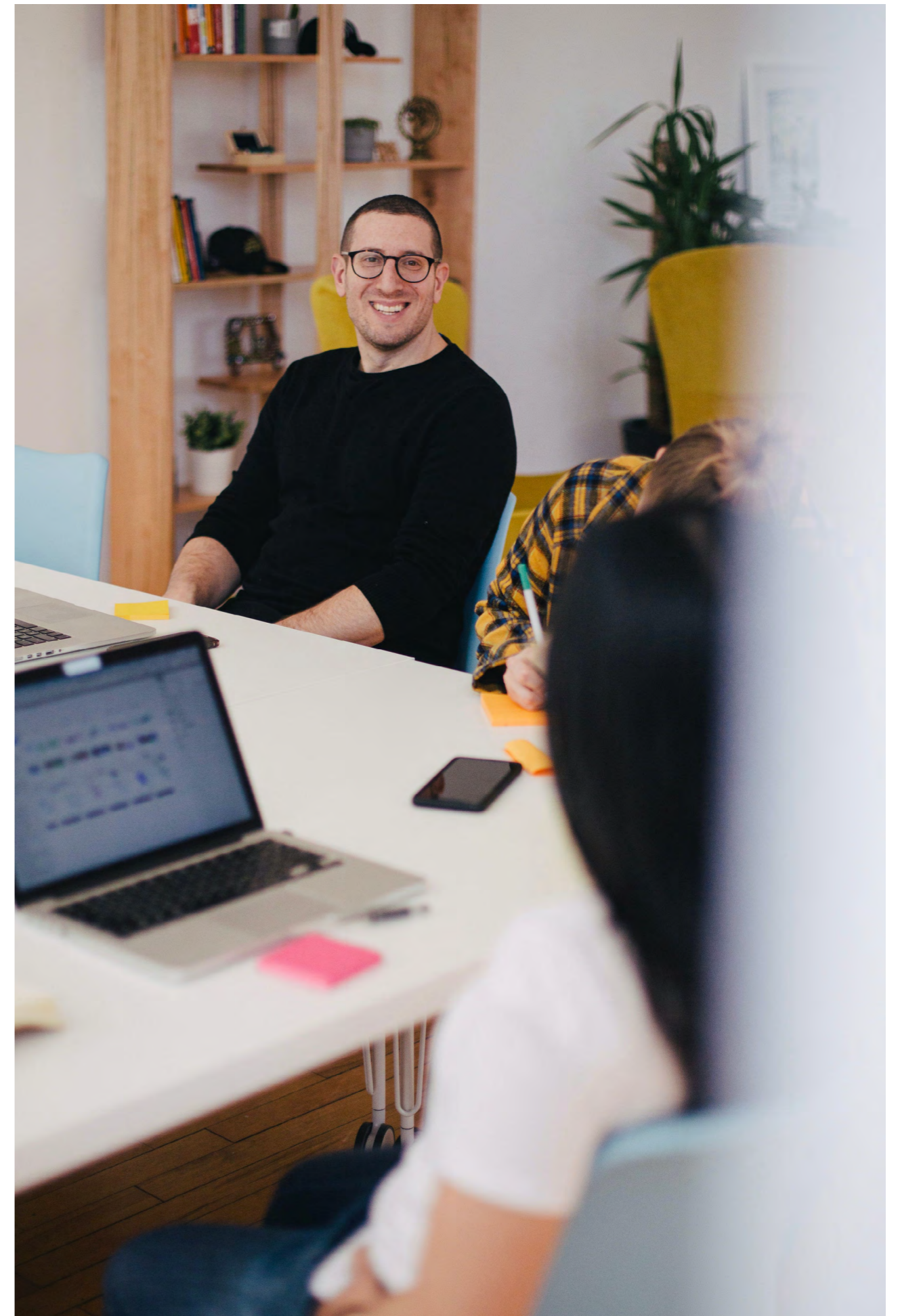
- Does the employee seem more tired or out of sorts than usual?
- Does the employee report poor or increased restlessness during sleep?
- Does the employee have difficulty falling asleep?

Thoughts

- Is there a decrease in concentration compared to usual?
- Is there a diminished ability to focus compared to usual?
- Is it harder than usual to make decisions?
- Is there reduced memory retention compared to usual?

Body

- Does the employee experience more frequent headaches? Heart palpitations? Indigestion?
- Does the employee experience more muscle pain?
- Is there a shortness of breath?
- Dizziness?



Action no. 2:

Create a joint action plan

02



When one loses one's equilibrium, reducing stress is vital. One must get the stress out of one's body, calm the nervous system and restore one's health. The causes of stress differ widely from employee to employee as does how you, as a manager, can help. When you decide to discuss stress, focus on adopting a neutral, inquisitive and professional approach in order to understand the individual's own perspective of their situation.

It is important to exercise strong leadership, especially when employees struggle to understand the gravity of the situation. The employee may hope that the stress will soon pass and may find it difficult to accept your help. There may also be assignments that the employee enjoys, despite the fact that it exceeds their current capacity. Such an employee may have difficulty letting go.

Whatever the case, an employee exhibiting obvious stress symptoms should be supported. You may wish to take control of their work until the strain has subsided and you have identified feasible solutions with them. Despite any initial reluctance, the vast majority of employees will experience a sense of relief.

Now you need to get ready for a dialogue that can lead to a joint action plan. Write down your preliminary steps, observations and suggestions in the relevant sections at the back of this guide. It is important that you are well prepared. It will help you conduct the dialogue so that your employee experiences capable leadership and feels confident that you understand the situation and how to provide support.

Step 1. Prepare for a dialogue with the employee

Step 2. Conduct the conversation

Step 3. Follow Up

Step 1: Prepare for a dialogue with the employee

If you have already spoken to your HR department and have received guidelines for a stress/well-being conversation, please base your preparations on that. Alternatively, consider how to provide notification of the meeting, when notice should be given, and how much time you should set aside for the actual conversation.

When you invite your employee to a meeting, inform them of it verbally first. This approach will allow the employee to discuss any initial concerns before the meeting, thus preventing undue alarm. To create a sense of security, tell them that the conversation will be about their well-being and how you can help.

You may wish to write down a few points that you want to make during the conversation. Be specific about the things you believe can be changed and what help you can offer.

Acknowledging the situation, regardless of your personal opinion, is crucial for building trust. It shows that you, as a manager, are committed to understanding a perhaps difficult, shameful and sensitive situation for the employee.

Focus on creating a safe space that builds trust and that allows you both to leave with a sense of calm and clarity regarding the next step. Your relationship skills as a manager are crucial for your employee's experience of the conversation and how you handle it. By being genuinely interested in and curious about the employee, you will allow the conversation to strengthen trust between the two of you. Such an informal dialogue can strengthen the relationship, so be authentic and do what you think is right.

Step 2: Conduct the conversation

Your employee may require assistance to understand, accept and simultaneously be guided through a joint action plan on the working conditions and tasks that can help to reduce the burden.

It is important that the plan is designed by your employee, with you as a guide and supporter. In order to arrive at a viable and realistic plan, be curious, listen and seek to understand how the situation feels for the employee without imposing your own judgement.

As a manager, you must be professionally curious. Ask about the employee and their well-being without evaluating, interpreting or providing explanations. You must listen and seek to understand the employee's experience. It's not about whether you agree with the employee's perspective or not.

As described below, the Conversation Diamond* provides a good model to structure the conversation.

Here's how you can structure the conversation:

1. During the discussion, it is a good idea to provide concrete examples that illustrate the reasons for your concern. Avoid referring to stories from colleagues, as this can only make the employee feel insecure in relation to their peers. Stick to what you have personally observed.
2. Once you have presented your concerns, you must give the employee the opportunity to comment and to provide their perspective on the situation.
3. Then, formulate a plan together. If the employee has the energy, let them take the lead. If not, you can take responsibility. Regardless, be sure to check in with the employee and make sure that you both agree on the plan.
4. Make sure there is clarity regarding responsibilities, the time frame and the nature of the agreement.

* Malene Friis Andersen and Maria Kingston, from Handbook for Managers 2016, Stop Stress

Conversation Diamond

Setting the stage:

- Explain why you have called this meeting and what you as a manager are concerned about and have noticed.
- Explain what you wish to discuss, for how long, and what happens afterwards.
- Remember that this meeting was initiated by you on the basis of a concern on your part.

Status of the employee's health and well-being:

- The investigative part of the discussion. Allow plenty of time for this. We often jump quickly from an investigative analysis of the problem to the need for action. It pays to get a clear picture of the challenge in order to facilitate the outcome we want in both the long and short term.
- How is the employee?
- Is there something that the employee feels particularly pressured about?
- How does the employee feel about work, workload, colleagues, the degree of difficulty of work?
- What symptoms does the employee report themselves. Maybe they are coping, but their resources are stretched a little thinly – we as managers must also provide leadership in such cases.

Options:

- Is there anything that could make a difference?
- Which assignments does the employee prefer to perform or can best perform?
- Which assignments does the employee prefer to not complete or cannot?
- Can some things be dropped?
- Is there anything that you as a leader can do to help?
- What can the employee do for themselves to feel better?
- Can anyone else help?
- Is there anything that can't be changed right now, and how can you two deal with that?

Agreements:

- What have you agreed on?
- Remember to involve the employee in creating the agreement as much as possible. This is because it is the employee who must ultimately experience the plan as a genuine relief.
- Who does what in the action plan?
- What exactly is the next step?
- How was the conversation?
- When will there be follow-up and what is the process?
- Is there anything that needs to be communicated to the outside world?

Source: Malene Friis Andersen and Maria Kingston, from Handbook for Managers 2016, Stop Stress

Step 3: Follow up

Arrange regular follow-up meetings to review the employee's schedule, work hours and performance, and to make necessary adjustments until the employee's stress response returns to normal. Always commit to these appointments, no matter how busy your own schedule looks.



Engaging in dialogue is, in itself, an effective, proactive measure

If you really know your employees, it is easier to align the competencies and assignments of each individual. Engaging in dialogue is, in itself, an effective, proactive measure. It's always easier to address difficult situations before they escalate. If discussions about well-being and stress become an integral part of daily work life, then it is easier for you, as a manager, to approach an employee if you notice changes. Be aware that your own stress situation is closely related to well-being. It affects overall productivity and the prevention of stress.

Unsure what to ask your employee?

While you may not ask directly about an employee's health challenges, you are welcome to share your observations and ask if there is anything the employee believes affects their ability to work. Your employee is welcome to voluntarily disclose if they are experiencing health problems. Remember that the conversation is confidential: you are not allowed to share information from the conversation to colleagues without the employee's consent.

Source:

<https://at.dk/arbejdsmiljoeoproblemer/sygefavaer/godt-tilbage-til-jobbet/hvad-maa-jeg-spoerge-om/>

Concrete measures against stress

Below are some concrete tools you can use. Start with one or two of them and pay attention to what works best. Allow for repetition. It takes time to develop new, positive habits.

1. Strive to be physically active every day.

Strive to be physically active every day. Physical activity prevents and relieves stress. It burns off stress hormones, rebuilds your body and brain, encourages better sleep and boosts your mood. Half an hour of physical activity is recommended daily.

Continuously using your body during everyday life has a beneficial effect on the brain. It also strengthens the blood supply to the brain, organs and muscles. Even a walk has a significant effect.

2. Try to mentally unwind. Learn to clear your mind.

Fifty percent of stress originates from one's own thoughts. Mental relaxation brings the nervous system into balance and in the long term, helps with creativity, concentration and focus. Shallow breathing increases the amount of stress hormones, so try breathing deep all the way down into your stomach and make your exhalations longer while letting go of your thoughts.

In order to give your brain a mental break, you can also use guided meditations and visualisations, connect with nature or go for a walk without your mobile.

3. Prioritise your time.

For example, by making "to-do lists" for both your workday and your free time. Create a list of priorities ranging from one to three. By prioritising, you achieve more, you avoid procrastination and you simultaneously clarify what is most important to you.

4. Improve your sleep: get enough and have a consistent bedtime.

Sleep is critical to our level of functionality during the day. When sleeping, the body regenerates and the brain recovers. Make sure to create a calm evening routine and cut back on stimulants a few hours before bedtime (e.g., screen use, coffee, vigorous physical activity and alcohol).

5. Seek to create balance.

This applies to all areas of your life. Focus on what gives you energy and what drains you so that you can maintain a balance between resources and demands.

Consider using the Wheel of Life to help you. It can be found in the following guide: "Stress - get off to a good start".

[Stress - get off to a good start](#) [Go to →](#)



Read more tips for stress management for individuals, complete with concrete tools, in this guide: "Stress – get off to a good start".

[Go to →](#)



You are welcome to distribute this guide to your employees. Sometimes there is a need to support oral communication with written material.



Action no. 1

Evidence of well-being in my department:

Signs of stress in my department:

Issues and trends, with points

Below, write down the issues and trends you see above, and give points from 0-10, where 10 is the most serious and requires action immediately. Identify the most easily achievable goals so that you can quickly make small changes that can have a significant impact

Issues/trends

Issues/trends

Action no. 2

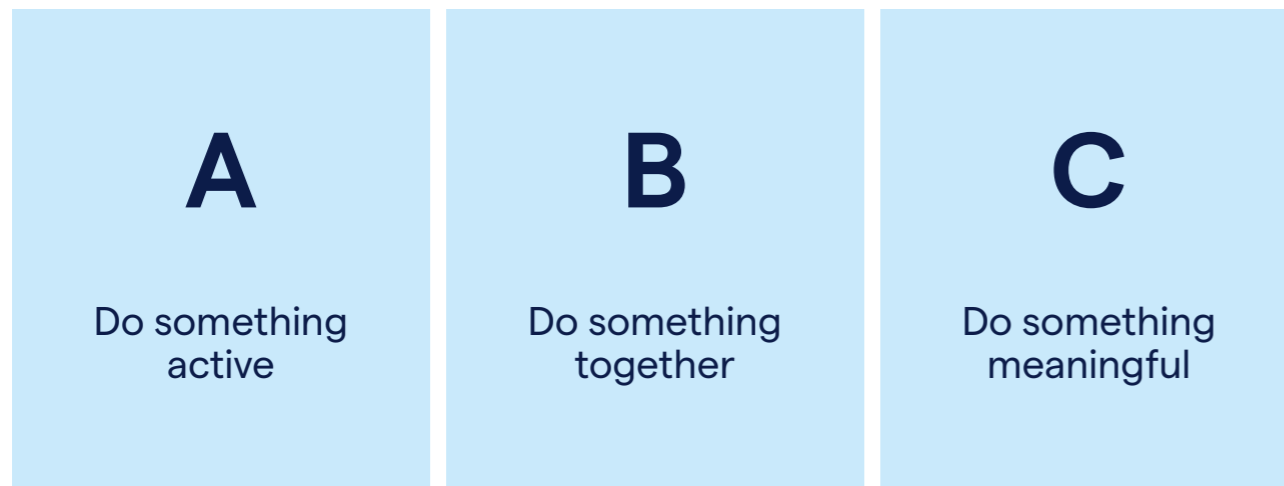
Step 1

Step 2

Step 3

The ABCs of Mental Health

Maintaining good mental health can be a confusing and complex endeavour. To ease the process, start with the ABCs of mental health. Based on research results, it outlines the following three simple rules to strengthen your mental health:



Oversat fra det engelske: Act, Belong og Commit.

Translated from English, it means: Act, Belong and Commit. Research demonstrates that mental well-being is strengthened when you are conscious of doing something active, meaningful and together. It can be a walk, participation in sports activities (perhaps there are some events at your company?), leisure activities, creative activities, participation in voluntary organisations and doing something positive for others - such as your colleague. You can start where it makes the most sense. Using these three memory helpers and acting on them aids in strengthening mental health and well-being.

Read more about the ABCs of Mental Health here:

[The ABCs of Mental Health](#) **Go to →**



A red rectangular box containing a quote in white text. The quote is: "Just as we have the KRAM factors for physical health, ABC are the factors to keep in mind in relation to mental health." Above the quote are two white slanted lines. Below the quote, the text "Quote:" is followed by "Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences – University of Copenhagen".

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