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I'LL
DO IT
TOMORROW

4 STEPS

TO STRESS

PREVENTION

MANAGEMENT

PPPUBLISHERS

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Between stimulus and response there is a space.
In that space is our power to choose our response.
In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

Viktor E. Frankl

I'll do it tomorrow

4 steps to stress prevention management

Helle Folden Dybdahl, Jesper Karle and Lars Aakerlund

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Jeg gør det i morgen

Fra undgåelse til stressforebyggende ledelse

Helle Folden Dybdahl, Jesper Karle and Lars Aakerlund

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FOREWORD

BREAK THE STRESS CURVE

IN 4 STEPS

What if we could lead a busy life without it making us sick? What if we were able to deal with the challenges that life throws at us, whether it be overtime, divorce or something else, without it having to lead to taking sick leave? What if we could slow down the development of stress-related disorders such as anxiety and depression? And what if everyone could experience a better work day? A work day with wellbeing and a shared focus on dealing with challenges as they arise and before they develop into even bigger problems and stress.

We believe it is possible!

We can't promise that we can remove all the discomfort and pressure of everyday life – that's a part of being human – but, through this book, we share our inspiration for how we can help

each other create a life where the challenges we face at home and at work don't have to develop into stress and disease.

For the past 17 years, we've been working intensively with both the treatment and prevention of stress. We have advised leaders, managers and employees across Europe and all types of organisations – both public and private – and we were behind a PhD on the subject (ref. 1). As a psychologist and medical specialists within the field of stress and stress-related disorders, we have talked to people with all kinds of and at all stages of stress-related disorders. We've learned that the sooner a person receives the right help to deal with stress, the less effort is needed and the better the result. We have also gained insight into the early stages of stress development, which, in turn, caused us to develop an interest in the very early prevention of stress. Today, we know that much can be done quite early on to prevent a person developing dangerous stress symptoms. This is what is new in our book; what we collectively call stress prevention management.

Some parts of the book are supported by research, while other parts are based on experience and case stories. Through these we present our ideas for how we can work together to break the stress curve, starting with leadership and management in the workplace. Not just in theory but in practice too.

“It's not enough to have knowledge on stress and an opinion of stress. Real stress prevention requires the right action at the right time.”

Our places of work are often berated for being the cause of people's stress, while our managers and leaders are the scapegoated group who needs to stop tyrannising employees. But workplaces have to understand that employees need safeguarding.

We believe it's neither reasonable nor constructive to demonise managers or employers or to lay all the blame and responsibility on them. We meet many managers who want to reduce stress among their employees, but who find it difficult to do so. Because what are you supposed to do as a manager – and what should you avoid?

As you read this book, you'll see that we understand stress as something to be dealt with collectively. Places of employment and managers are a central part of the solution for an employee experiencing stress – even if the symptoms of stress aren't from the pressures of work, but are due to other conditions in the workplace or challenges in their personal life.

Our goal with this book is to provide you, as a manager, with an understanding of how you can help prevent a lack of thriving and dissatisfaction among your employees, and how you can stop early signs of stress from developing into more severe stress, disease and sick leave. It's not just about doing "something" as a manager. With this book, we take that further and present what we believe you need to know about both your employees and yourself, and how, as a manager, you can contribute to preventing stress through your management and leadership.

Debunking myths about stress

Our aim with this book is also to challenge and point out the nuances in the current perception of stress. Despite the publication of numerous good books and articles on stress, many myths about what stress is and how best to treat it abound. These myths mean that much of the efforts aimed at targeting stress in organisations and companies are built on an outdated and rigid view of stress. Some little effect may, of course, be seen, but we don't *really* get any further. We would like to change that.

Every day, 35,000 people in Denmark alone take sick leave due to stress and stress-related disorders, such as anxiety and depression. And a probably even larger number goes to work while showing symptoms of stress, not feeling or doing well and performing badly at work – what is termed “presenteeism”. It's hard for them, their families and their places of work. And losing so much of the labour force is a huge loss for society. Many of those who are absent due to stress never return to the work market, which was precisely what we addressed in our first book, *Tag på arbejde – fra sygemelding til samarbejde [Go to Work – From Sick Note to Fit Note – available in Danish]* (2016). In it, we focused on how the various parties involved, including employers, get people back to work after they have been absent due to illness. Now we want to avoid sick leave in the first place. In other words, our mission with this book is to make our first book redundant.

You need to challenge your avoidance behaviour

For years, we've been allowed to listen to and help people who have been affected by lesser or more severe symptoms of stress.

It's experience from these conversations that forms the basis of the examples presented here. However, as this is a book about preventing and taking early action on stress, many of the stories don't bear the mark of people who have been suffering for a long time. Rather the stories are about people who are in such early phases of stress that neither they nor their managers necessarily know they are dealing with the early onset of stress. That's how it starts for most people. The stories are real and have been taken from our work with employees with stress and from our discussions with managers. All personal details have been changed.

You will notice that the people you meet in this book rarely develop symptoms of stress from *too much work* alone. There's usually much more than piles of papers putting pressure on them. Common to all of them is that those who do best discuss their experience of being weighed down with stress early on with their managers. And they work with their managers on finding concrete solutions, which prevent symptoms of stress from developing.

And it's precisely this collaboration between employees and managers, with the aim of avoiding the development of symptoms of stress, that we focus on here. A collaboration, which, as a manager and leader, you can take responsibility for creating through a targeted focus on stress prevention management.

You may think there isn't much new in that, because you already talk to your employees. But do you still talk to them when they first begin to withdraw from you too? Or when they get angry with you? The key issue is for you to understand that you have to challenge your avoidance behaviour. You have to be willing

to learn to face problems and to talk to your employees in a way that few people are used to. The goal is to learn to be professionally curious rather than waiting to see what happens or avoiding what is hard due to a fear of getting too close, being too personal or making the situation worse.

Mental issues are rarely easy to work with, but the tools we give you here are quite simple in principle. Though they can be challenging to put into practice, at least in the beginning. You may have to let go of some habits and adopt a few new ones. You might also have to draw up a new basic perception of stress. But you will find over time that stress-related sick leave in your organisation will decline.

We can't guarantee that you will never have to call in a temp, send a get well card or take a sick day yourself if you start practising the four steps that are at the heart of stress prevention management. But if you use the book's methods, you will need fewer temps in the future. And employee job satisfaction will increase. This is how we can break the stress curve together – with the workplace as the starting point for prevention.

The book is primarily for those who are managers and leaders, but we would recommend that you share what we write here with your employees.

Happy Reading,

Helle Folden Dybdahl, Jesper Karle and Lars Aakerlund
2019

INTRODUCTION

STRESS PREVENTION MANAGEMENT

People are different and react differently
to the same events.

Much of what creates stress for the individual
can be removed or significantly reduced.

It's important to create space and conditions
so that each employee can be helped at an
early stage with practical solutions to bring
them back to an experience of being in
control of their own life.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT STRESS AND HOW CAN WE PREVENT IT?

Newspapers often write about stress. Magazines feature articles with advice from stress experts. And bookshelves overflow with books on stress – including one we’ve written in addition to this volume. So why yet another book about stress? We’d like to answer that question by asking another question: has it helped? Has the number of people experiencing stress reduced?

The short answer is: no. According to the Danish Health Authority (ref. 2), in 2007, 9 per cent of the Danish population often experienced being stressed. Seven years later, in 2014, the figure had risen to 15 per cent. In other words, every sixth Dane often felt stressed. And this sad development has continued in recent years. According to the Danish Health Authority’s figures for 2017, 25 per cent of the population experienced a high level of stress and 19 per cent of employed Danes felt very stressed. But it’s even worse for those who aren’t in work – as many as 47 per cent of them are living with a high level of stress. This figure suggests that it’s not only our workload that can make us stressed. We’ll return to this later.

HOW STRESSED ARE THE DANES?

2007:

- 9 % of the Danish population experience that they often feel stressed.

2014:

- 15 % of the Danish population experience that they often feel stressed.

2017:

- 25 % of the Danish population experience a high level of stress.

And, if we turn to our European neighbours, a 2018 study by the Mental Health Foundation of 4,619 British respondents – the largest known study of stress levels in the UK to date – found that a staggering 74 per cent of those polled had felt so stressed over the previous year that they had felt overwhelmed or unable to cope, with women reporting more stress than men (ref. 3). While, further across the pond, a 2014 online survey by the American Psychological Association thankfully found that the number of Americans saying stress has impacted their physical or mental health (25 per cent in 2015 vs 37 per cent in 2011 and 28 per cent in 2014 vs 35 per cent in 2011, respectively) is declining. Yet, 75 per cent of the 3,068 Americans polled reported experiencing at least one physical symptom of stress in the past month, with parents, women, younger generations and those living in low-income households reporting higher levels of stress overall (ref. 4). These figures are alarming, even allowing for differences in population, because despite the fact that we

talk and write so much about stress, the number of people who are stressed is growing. And the issue is that we aren't building a bridge between the theories of stress and effective stress prevention in practice. Nowadays, we know a lot about what creates wellbeing and job satisfaction. We also know that there is an important relationship between severe stress and some well-defined disorders, such as depression and anxiety. And yet we haven't found the answer to limiting stress.

The media tends to have a particular focus on stress. Five repeated messages are:

- 1) Stress is dangerous.
- 2) Stress is a physical disease.
- 3) Stress is being in a state of overload.
- 4) Stress demands peace and calm.
- 5) Stress is a diagnosis.

The commonly accepted definition of stress reads: “a special relationship between the person and the environment, which is perceived as a strain on the person or which exceeds his or her resources and threatens his or her wellbeing” (ref. 5). This is a broad definition, which covers many different problems. But what do we actually know about stress? What facts do we have? Let's get something straight right away: stress is neither a specific condition nor a medical diagnosis. The word “stress” is used indiscriminately and as a term for everything from mild symptoms to severe diseases requiring specific treatment. If we look at the diagnostic manual ICD-10 (International Classification of Disorder – 10th Edition) by the World Health Organisation

(WHO), stress doesn't feature at all as a diagnosis. In ICD-10, there are diagnoses of stress-related conditions in the form of "adjustment disorders", "acute stress reaction" and "post-traumatic stress disorder". These conditions are triggered by external strain. And there are diagnoses for disorders such as "anxiety disorders" and "depression" – disorders that can be wholly or partially stress-related. But pure "stress" as a diagnosis isn't included.

According to WHO, in just a few years stress-related depression will be the most widespread epidemic. When we encounter people who have been labelled as "stressed", many of them are suffering from diseases such as depression or anxiety disorders, while other people's symptoms are mild and transient and pass once the strain comes to an end.

The *symptoms* of stress can be both physical and mental. And they can be severe. If you have been on sick leave with a stress-related health problem, or if you know someone who has, you know that the symptoms felt in relation to stress can be very unpleasant and feel quite threatening. The symptoms are real and they can make you sick if you don't intervene in time.

If you believe that stress is a clearly defined and distinctly demarcated disorder triggered by external (over)burdening, then you probably also believe that proper treatment exists. And for most people that equates to peace and quiet. We find it worrying that this is how the majority still understand stress. We don't disagree that you may need peace and quiet and a shorter period of sick leave if you experience severe symptoms of stress. But stress is much more nuanced than that and can, as we mentioned

above, cover a large number of different conditions. If you talk to a group of people who are all experiencing serious stress, it will manifest itself in each of them quite differently. On the one hand are people with severe stress-related diseases, particularly depression and anxiety disorders. And on the other are people who don't feel well, but who haven't developed a disorder and who, therefore, don't need to be diagnosed with anything at all.

In our experience, peace and quiet isn't the only treatment effective for people who are considered to be severely stressed, and every day we see the unfortunate consequences of long-term sick leave, in stressed people who become increasingly ill. Peace and quiet may – perhaps – dull the symptoms of stress for a while and can put a lid on some worries, negative thoughts and the experience of discomfort, but peace and quiet also risk the same thoughts, feelings and physical discomfort being exacerbated. Thus, as we wrote about in our first book, the person's health risks deteriorating still further if creating a sustainable solution isn't tackled early on in the process.

Because stress arises for many different reasons, we should prevent and manage stress with different individual solutions too, depending on what the individual is experiencing. This is one of the crucial points of this book – that, as a manager and leader, you should take an interest in the individual person's experience early on, so you can avoid a lack of attention and action worsening the symptoms of stress and leading to serious illness.

In our view, the workplace is the best starting point for seriously reducing widespread stress. We mean this – despite many people

believing this is actually where all the stress stems from and that work is a place to get away from in order to get rid of stress. If we can recognise and accept that stress requires an interest in the individual person and we start working from there, we can go far.

Exactly how far was revealed in a 2014 British guide, which showed the positive results of three major British companies after they had introduced programmes for dealing with mental health problems, including stress (ref. 6). Here, managers took early action and various employee initiatives were implemented in workplaces, so employees weren't simply sent home on sick leave when they experienced stress or mental health issues. Absence due to illness caused by psychological problems and stress complaints dropped dramatically at all three companies, by up to 50 per cent, and at one company alone, the savings in relation to sick leave were calculated to be the equivalent of £1.3 million. Such a huge sum begs the question: can we afford not to do anything? According to another British report from 2017 (ref. 7), 40 per cent of all sickness absence is due to stress, anxiety and depression.

Only the cost of sick leave related to mental health was calculated here. An even bigger problem is the phenomenon of presenteeism, which means reduced productivity due to going to work while presenting with symptoms of stress. A British government report from 2012 (ref. 8) estimates that the social cost of presenteeism is 2.6 times greater than that caused by absence due to illness. There is so much to gain from early intervention and from helping people avoid getting sick.

A nuanced view of stress

If we really want to understand stress and develop solid 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 as a response to too much work, as many people currently believe. But this isn't necessarily the case. We should understand stress, to a much greater extent, as an individual intellectual and emotional reaction to *experienced* strain – a reaction that can occur as a result of many different reasons. This is why we can never break the stress curve with a one-size-fits-all solution, such as reducing workload or hours, improving the employee's overall health or moving the employee away from the workplace. We need to be interested in the individual person's experience and interpretation; that is, the thoughts and feelings they have about the strain they are experiencing.

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.
- Shielding an employee with early stress symptoms by isolating them from the working community can aggravate the situation.
- The symptoms of stress are both mental and physical. Stress can lead to mental and/or physical illness.
- 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.
- As a manager, you should intervene when an employee shows signs of stress - even if you think their stress is due to something in their private life.

Stress models

There are a number of models that try to explain when we develop stress. Some models focus on which external factors can trigger stress among employees at work. Other models focus on how employees perceive and understand factors that trigger stress. According to the Danish Working Environment Authority, three of the major models are the demand-control model, the effort-reward model and the job demand-resource model (ref. 9). The starting point of all three models is stress due to the imbalance between the demands placed on an employee at work and the opportunities the employee has for dealing with those demands.

STRESS MODELS

- Demand-control model: an employee can feel stressed when they face high demands on the job and at the same time have little influence on their work duties. Perhaps several tasks have to be done by a short deadline (high demand), but they can't say no to new tasks (little influence).
- Effort-reward model: an employee can feel stressed when they experience an imbalance between the effort they make in their work and the reward they receive.
- Job demand-resource model: an employee can feel stressed when they experience an imbalance between the demands of work and their own resources. Resources could, for example, be support from the management or team of colleagues.

The Danish Working Environment Authority states that, taken together, these models cover the following important points:

- Job-related stress can occur when there is an imbalance between burden and resources.
- There may be different types of imbalance in different jobs.
- There is a difference between how we experience burdens and interpret resources. What stresses one employee won't necessarily stress their colleague.

Here, the three classic stress models are correct. We do indeed see a lot of people who work a certain number of hours and have demands placed on them that obviously exceed their resources, which, in turn, leads to symptoms of stress and disease. But the models are far from adequate. We are now seeing even more people who find that the demands being made of them are unmanageable, but whom, when *seen objectively*, aren't burdened. This doesn't change the person's own experience of feeling under pressure. And so we are back to the disparity that exists between the objective image and the person's own experience, and which it's necessary to shine a light on in order to move forward with the prevention of more serious stress.

In the 1960s, attempts were made to award points to different types of stress in order to compare the severity of the burden (ref. 10). For example, points were given if you were dismissed from your job, got a new job or got divorced. The idea was that by counting up the points you could see who was stressed and who wasn't. But some of those awarded the most points had no symptoms of stress at all. And some people who got very few

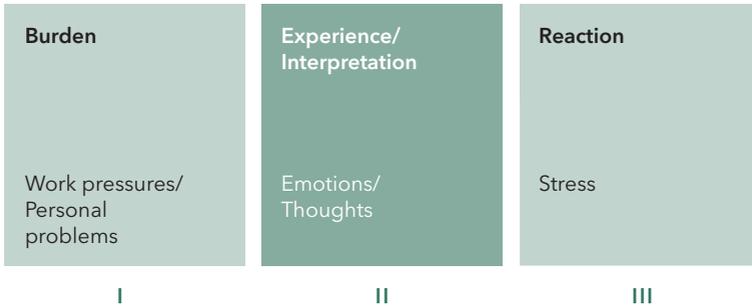
points had many symptoms. One or many external strains don't necessarily indicate who will react with symptoms of stress and who won't.

So if we are going to understand when we are likely to respond with symptoms of stress, we need a more nuanced understanding of stress as a reaction stemming from thoughts and emotions. External burdens don't necessarily lead to a stress reaction. And a stress reaction can come about without any external strain. It all depends on the individual person's *experience and interpretation of the situation*. And this is a question of three elements:

- Burden/strain
- The individual interpretation
- Reaction

From burden to reaction

Let's take a closer look at "the three-part model", which can offer a good foundation for effectively preventing stress as it breaks with the traditional perception 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. Let's look at an example of how an employee can experience a job assignment in two very different ways and experience completely different degrees of pressure in relation to it.



The three-part model

You go to one of your employees and tell them about a huge, new project, for which they are going to be the lead. It's complex and important, but the parameters aren't quite clear yet. Your 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 take the lead, 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."

Note that the project – the objective burden – is the same. But the experience and interpretation of the situation is very different. The example demonstrates that stress prevention doesn't necessarily lie in removing the job at hand, but in examining how the individual employee *experiences and interprets* the assignments they get.

A fruit basket isn't enough

Given the importance of taking an interest in the individual employee's experience and interpretation, which we have just described, it is, of course, problematic that so many people equate prevention with general health and wellbeing.

Many of the initiatives for preventing stress that are currently gaining ground are based on a broad and unspecific approach to employee welfare. There is much well-meaning advice on eating healthily, exercising, getting plenty of sleep and disconnecting with mindfulness. And, on the face of it, the easy and practical advice has also – to a large extent – become the pivotal point of research in relation to creating a good working environment. Indeed, “the 6 pearls of wisdom” have long provided a framework for how to prevent stress in the workplace.

THE 6 PEARLS OF WISDOM:

- Influence
- Reward
- Purpose
- Social support
- Predictability
- Demand.

Source: The Danish National Research Centre for the Working Environment (ref. 11)

Many places of employment would like to support their employees' health; fruit baskets, organic canteens, massages and gym memberships are provided for employees. Some workplaces are even trying to help employees improve their sleep patterns. Others arrange after-work meetings on "the healthy working environment". Fruit baskets, fitness and after-work meetings are definitely good initiatives if you want to develop and maintain a good workplace and help employees have a healthy lifestyle. But if we want to reduce stress and absence due to illness, we can't focus on the general health of employees alone. Free fruit and after-work meetings don't prevent or eliminate the reaction that arises in each of us when we experience pressure or an unwelcome change, or when we feel misunderstood or unfairly treated. And they certainly don't help the employee who is experiencing a concrete, pressurised situation and who needs their manager's help in resolving it.

Whose fault is it?

Paradoxically, the much well-intentioned advice on exercise, diet, sleep and effective working days can actually – despite the best intentions – make us even more stressed, because the responsibility for our wellbeing at work and job satisfaction has now become our own. If we develop stress, it's our own fault. To have avoided it, we should simply have followed some of the many suggestions.

Many people also point to the employee themselves being to blame for the stress. It can be just as wrong to blame the individual employee for stress as it is to blame their place of work.

There are, of course, exceptions to this. Some workplaces contribute to creating stress among a large group of employees; for example, by the workload exceeding what the employees can manage. There are also managers who have an adverse and stress-inducing effect on their employees. And yes, there are employees who are at particular personal risk of developing stress, employees who have difficulty taking care of themselves and employees who are poorly suited to the job they are in. And, lastly, we sometimes see collaboration problems and general dissatisfaction with the job being “masked” as stress. All of this helps confuse the picture.

That said, we actually have to get away from placing blame. Instead, we have to recognise that stress prevention at work needs to be based on the relationship between you as a manager and your employee; that is, the one to one relationship. This can be a crucial starting point for breaking the stress curve.

As it stands today, many managers fail to intervene at the first signs of stress. Perhaps you know this from your own personal experience. You avoid talking to an employee about what is putting them under pressure, for fear they will reveal something you can't handle. Or you are afraid that you'll get too close and become involved in something personal. This may be related to the nature of stress itself – stress includes anxiety, and anxiety is at the heart of avoidance behaviour. And avoiding what is difficult ends up applying to both you and your employee.

New prevention methods

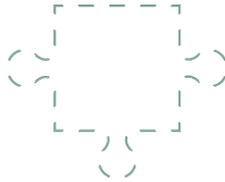
There's a disconnect between what we today call the prevention of stress – for example, all the many health initiatives – and the help given to the individual employee who has become stressed or ill. In other words, there is a “missing link” between the organisation's health initiatives and the treatment of the individual employee, for example, by a psychologist.

If we want to put an end to stress, we need to focus precisely on the point at which symptoms of stress haven't yet developed into a disorder that will require treatment. Rather we need to focus on where the employee is clearly experiencing pressure and needs assistance through leadership and management to get better because the general health initiatives within the organisation aren't sufficient and they can't handle the feelings of dissatisfaction and discontent on their own.

The missing link



Organisation



Professional
curiosity for
employee



Psychologist

This is when the employee needs leadership – what we call stress prevention management. This is where you have to step in and be **professionally curious** about your employee.

Professional curiosity involves you as a manager and leader:

- Being aware of behavioural changes in each employee, particularly small changes that may be the first signs of stress.
- Asking questions so you and your employee come to a common understanding of what is at stake for them.
- Helping your employee with a solution that brings them back to a place of control.
- Following up with frequent conversations about their well-being.

You may be wondering why this should be part of your role. As a manager and leader, it's your job to *lead* your employees – even when it's difficult. You are the one out in front, showing how your workplace tackles challenges. As a manager, you have a responsibility to your place of employment, the group and the individual employee.

With regard to work duties – that is, the task you and your employees are employed to resolve – and the group's wellbeing, as the manager, you have a particular responsibility for the employees experiencing that you can work together, that things happen fairly, that you are trustworthy and that the employees can trust each other. One of the most destructive things for a group's wellbeing are employees who are affected by – and possibly on sick leave with – stress. This typically destabilises the group's experi-

ence of its ability to collaborate and of fairness as well as the level of trust within the group. And that has consequences for the common purpose: the task at hand (ref. 11).

When it comes to the individual employee, as the manager, you have a responsibility for ensuring that they get the help and support they need. Thus, you have a responsibility to investigate what help is needed and find a possible solution if an employee is experiencing being under pressure and feeling challenged. As a manager, you have a responsibility not to avoid the problem, but to face it head on.

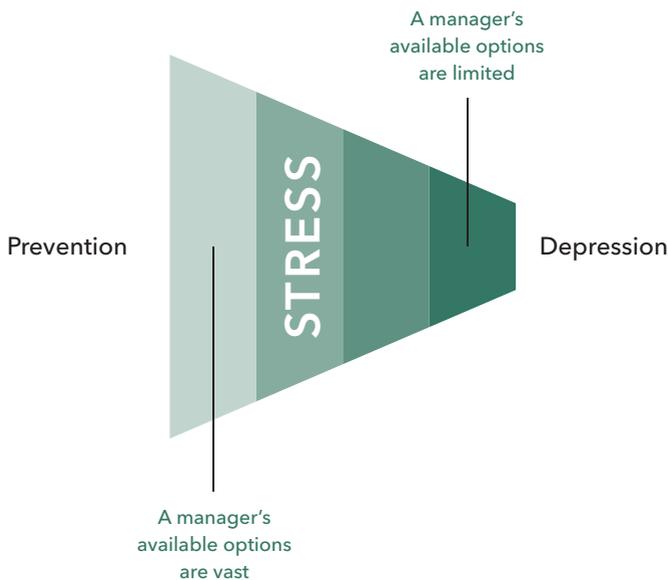
If managers need to be aware of the work, the group's wellbeing and the individual employee, then stress prevention is absolutely central.

There is nothing new in managers having to talk to their employees. Our message is for you to be aware of *what* you are talking to your employees about and *when* you talk to them. Stress prevention management is largely about thinking differently and not withdrawing or avoiding taking action – something we can all be inclined to do when someone is having difficulty. In Step 2 we give you solid, practical advice on how to develop and work with professional curiosity. And we acknowledge that being a manager is demanding and entails a number of difficult challenges. So bear with us if we sometimes seem to simplify things in this book. We aren't in any way trying to make things sound easier than they are in real life.

Go after what actions are available

Serious stress-related disorders, such as depression and anxiety, don't occur because an employee has had a few bad days. Or because they have been sleeping badly for a while. They typically develop over time, often several months. And you can very often avoid that development by identifying it and tackling it as early as possible.

In the figure, you can see what options are available to you, as a manager, in relation to an employee developing stress. The earlier in the process you step in, the greater the opportunity you have to help. And vice versa – the later you intervene, the harder it will be for you to do something for your employee and help them get back on track as the employee will increasingly need health care, i.e. psychological and/or medical treatment. This process limits your options.



The employee's responsibility

We often hear stressed employees say, “My manager didn’t do anything to prevent it. She should have been able to see how badly I was doing . . .” But a manager can’t read an employee’s thoughts. A manager can’t look into their employees and know how they are doing.

If, as a manager, you are to have the possibility of intervening in time and helping an employee reach a solution, then you need to be made aware that there is a problem. When an employee suddenly breaks down and says “it’s all too much”, it would have made a huge difference if the employee in question had considered themselves earlier and thought: “I don’t feel like I usually do. I’m reacting differently. I’ve a short fuse. I’m feeling under pressure. What caused it? And what can help me get well again?”

But it can be difficult or impossible for an employee to make that analysis by themselves if they have already reached the stage where they want to storm into your office and say that it has all become too much. It’s the very nature of stress that by that point, they can’t help themselves – because they are experiencing irrational and negative thoughts about themselves. So it’s far more important that together we practise regularly talking about the experience of pressure as soon as we notice its onset.

Stress prevention is primarily about insisting on a dialogue and about how we can make a plan together once the first symptoms appear. For managers to be able to help find a solution, it requires mutual trust between them and the employee, and a safe work environment.

This brings us to an important point in relation to stress prevention management: much of the stress prevention work for which you are responsible can't really be done when things are about to fall apart and an employee is experiencing symptoms of stress. It has to be done in what you could call *peace time*. It's in peace time – when there are no pressing difficult cases, but peace and stability in the employee group – that, as a manager, you have to share how you would like to work together to handle symptoms of stress if they occur. It's also in peace time that you have to tell your employees what they can expect of you and what you expect of them. And it's in peace time that you have to talk to your employees about how stress prevention is a shared responsibility, about the importance of mutual openness if you are to be able to help, and about the communication between colleagues and the necessary follow-up.

As humans, we are all responsible for finding out what we need. We need to ask for help when it comes to whatever we ourselves can't find a solution to. This applies regardless of whether you are a manager or an employee. Your employees have a responsibility to go to you if they are experiencing pressure – even if that pressure isn't due to work. They should involve you and help you by telling you what they need. Or by telling you that they need management, leadership and support. But once you know that it can be difficult for an employee to share these things with you directly, then you can practise meeting your employees halfway, so that symptoms of stress don't develop.

The 4 Steps

Now that we have been through the introduction, it's time to get started with the four parts of the book, which together form the stress prevention management method. The four steps in stress prevention management are:



SPOT IT



ASK AND UNDERSTAND



FIND THE SOLUTION



FOLLOW UP

STEP 1

SPOT IT



Stress starts with small changes.

Be aware if your employee
is reacting differently to usual.

Keep an eye out for behavioural changes.

DETECT CHANGES EARLY ON

If you notice an employee changing, it may be a good idea to give them more attention to find out if they are indeed developing stress. Pay attention to how they act in different situations. Do they seem openly pressured? Have they begun snapping at others, or are they complaining every day about the food being served in the canteen? Sometimes you can see clear signs that something isn't as it should be. At other times, you have to look behind the façade to detect whether what the employee is complaining about is actually a cover-up for the onset of stress.

Early signs of stress and the symptoms of stress may differ widely, as we've already mentioned, and this will often be difficult for you to spot because it's something the employee is struggling with and would rather not talk about. So listed below is an overview of such signs to make it easier for you. This will help you get to know what your employee is experiencing and what you can urge your employees to be aware of in themselves.

Early signs of stress

PHYSICAL SIGNS OF STRESS

(felt by the employee)

- 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

(felt by the employee)

- 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

These symptoms are normal reactions and the majority of people are familiar with them. You're probably even familiar with them yourself. But even if you recognise many of the symptoms, it doesn't necessarily mean you need to be concerned. However, if you notice changes such as those listed above in one of your employees – or in yourself – over a number of weeks, there may be good reason to pay particular attention. Because problems don't occur when you respond to something you have noticed, but rather when you don't react to the change or perhaps even get used to it. Take action while you can. If an employee tells you or indicates that they have had a headache or pain in their stomach over a long period, then you should investigate what is behind the reaction.

The negative thoughts and feelings of an employee who is feeling under pressure often contribute to the employee not seeking help from either you or others. The changes often come about subtly and gradually. Perhaps they don't even realise that things are developing in a negative direction. They may think that they just need to pull themselves together or that seeking help won't make a difference anyway. They may be feeling ashamed, which, in turn, impedes them from telling others how they are doing. They may, justly or not, have thoughts of being subjected to unreasonable pressure from you. Therefore, you often won't be told about how they are doing.

The previous two lists cover the invisible signs of stress. But as we have seen, you can't expect to receive information from your employee. So what are you supposed to do? It's likely there are also a number of visible changes that will be a little easier for you to spot. Initially, they may be small, imperceptible changes, but they could be signs of underlying stress and, therefore, it's important to notice them. Here is a list of the most common behavioural changes. In Step 2, we examine what you can do when you see these changes in an employee.

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.

Now we're going to meet Lisa. With the help of her story, we illustrate what happens when an employee changes their behaviour, and what you as a manager need to be aware of.

Being overbooked and a duvet day

Lisa's story

At an office in Aarhus, Lisa puts her head in her hands. What has she got herself into? She's just succeeded in selling three workshops to one of their biggest customers. Lisa can hardly believe it. The top managers are delighted. She should be happy, but suddenly she feels as if everything is crashing down around her. Because there's a problem. Her son turns 10 on the day of the first workshop, and her daughter is going to the national school football championships on the day of the second workshop. Lisa has promised to be there for her children. She rubs her temples, thinking "*How can I cope?*"

On her way to the canteen, she meets her manager, Jane. Jane smiles when she sees Lisa, but Lisa doesn't respond.

"What's up with you today?" Jane asks, elbowing her playfully as they stand beside each other in the queue in the canteen.

"Nothing!" Lisa exclaims annoyed.

"I was only asking. Has something happened?"

"No!"

They're quiet for a moment. Lisa looks up at the board with the day's specials.

"Vegetable lasagne, ugh."

They eat in silence, and Lisa quickly returns to her office, her thoughts ruminating on the three workshops. What should she do? Her thoughts are swirling, but she can't think of any answer. Then the trainee, Sarah, asks about the printer yet again, making Lisa so annoyed that she reacts by shouting. Sarah looks scared. Lisa slams her door and sits down behind her desk. She has to get this situation under control now. What will the customer say when she cancels? And what will her boss

say? Not Jane, but the company's managing director. What if the customer is so dissatisfied that they close their account? Would she be fired? What Lisa most wants is to turn off the computer and go home. She doesn't usually feel like this. She's a middle manager and is accustomed to juggling many balls at the same time. She can handle pressure. Occasionally, she even thinks she actually enjoys it. She's often heard herself tell other people how it gives an edge to her job and makes her go the extra mile. She finds the experience of something being at stake thrilling. Except for now. Right now, everything is tumbling down around her.

Just then there's a knock on the door.

"Yes!" snaps Lisa.

Jane opens the door.

"Do you have a moment?"

"No!"

Jane goes into her office anyway.

"Sarah is standing by the printer, sniffing. What's wrong?"

Lisa sighs and points to a chair. Jane sits down. Then Lisa tells her about her dilemma.

"I think you should contact the customer and explain," says Jane, when Lisa has finished telling her about her predicament with the workshops, her son's birthday and her daughter's football championship.

"Explain?"

Lisa looks like someone who has just received terrible news.

"Yes. Listen, try to move the workshops, maybe you can find other dates," Jane continues.

"But what if they're not happy with that? What if . . ."

"Because of this? I think it'd take more than this!"

Lisa starts sweating, and is still annoyed, but does as Jane says: she sends an email to the client suggesting some other dates.

The next morning, Lisa wakes up early and checks her phone. No answer yet. She takes a shower and makes coffee. Still no answer. Then she drives to work. The traffic is already building up. Her thoughts revolve around only one thing: should she ring the customer? No, she tells herself. It's still early. They need to have a chance to see the email. But what if they're angry? Her thoughts race ahead much faster than the traffic. Lisa considers turning around. And is that the flu she can feel coming on too? Maybe she should just take a sick day to forget all about it and get back on her feet again. Just one day.

Just then the phone rings. It's Jane.

"Hi," exclaims Lisa, surprised.

"I just wanted to hear how it's going."

"Oh, thanks. Well . . . Um, not so good. I'm actually on the way into work, but I'm thinking about turning around. I'm not feeling great . . . I think maybe it'd better if I work from home today."

"Are you sick?"

"No . . . I don't know. The customer hasn't answered. It's such a mess, and I don't feel well."

"Come in to the office. Just for a couple of hours. I've a case I'd like you to look at. Just a quick look."

Lisa sighs.

"Okay."

At 10.30, they're finished with Jane's case. It wasn't particularly complicated, and Lisa wonders why Jane even asked for her help.

But now that she's here anyway, she might as well stay. She can always take a duvet day tomorrow.

The next day is the same. Lisa doesn't feel great and has actually decided to stay at home when a colleague calls. They aren't very close. But now the colleague suddenly needs Lisa's help.

"What are you up to?" Lisa asks, sitting at the lunch table with her arms crossed, staring at Jane.

"What do you mean?" asks Jane.

"Do you think I don't know what you're doing? That you rang to get me in here? And now you're getting other people to do it, too."

Jane takes a sip of water.

"You moping around at home, sad and lonely, doesn't help anybody. We need you here."

"I'm not sad! Or lonely. Thanks very much!"

"Ring the client now. Get it over and done with."

Lisa shakes her head, goes up to the buffet and serves herself a portion of the dish of the day. Maybe Jane is right. Maybe she should just get it over and done with.

Back in the office, she dials the customer's number with sweaty hands. She hardly dares breathe when they finally pick up.

"Yes, we've seen your email," says the friendly secretary on the phone. "And of course it's perfectly okay to change the dates this far ahead. We're just looking at what new dates suit us best."

Lisa breathes a sigh of relief. Was that all it took?

Is Lisa stressed?

Lisa responds with symptoms of stress and her behaviour has changed. Her reaction is by no means unusual, but as a man-

ager you'll probably quickly notice that something is wrong. Lisa works hard, but apparently isn't overburdened with things to do. It doesn't seem as if the piles of papers on her desk are pressurising her. In fact, we don't hear much about the amount of work she has to do. Actually, we hear more about how much she loves her job. Yet we are in no doubt about her feeling under pressure. You can clearly sense it in the way she snaps at people and can't focus on anything. And when she's in her car on her way to work and is considering turning around, we know without doubt that she is feeling pressurised. But is she stressed?

In "the three-part model", which we showed on page 26, we explained how we typically react with symptoms of stress when we experience being under pressure: we ascertain that there is a strain. We experience and interpret the burden. And then we react to the experience. We all act the same way here, regardless of our gender, age or position. We respond in the same way when we perceive something as dangerous. But what we experience as dangerous and how much we can bear before we develop symptoms of stress is very different from person to person. And the symptoms of the reaction vary individually, too.

It's important when looking for the onset of stress that you remember symptoms vary from person to person. To find out what is going on with the employee facing you, you need professional curiosity.

Let's put Lisa into "the three-part model" to see the connection between *strain* → *experience* → *reaction*.

- **Strain**

Lisa is to hold three workshops for the customer her managers most want to collaborate with. But she is unable to attend two of them, and now she finds herself in a predicament. What should she cancel – her plans with her children or work? So it's not the assignment itself – the three workshops – that are a burden for Lisa. The burden is the dilemma of the two workshops coinciding with events in her private life, which are important to Lisa.

- **Experience**

The project itself is actually positive. Lisa feels that she's in demand, but because it coincides with private arrangements, she feels under pressure and the situation seems problematic to her. Lisa is afraid that whatever she chooses she will be letting someone down. It's a difficult situation for her, and she is immediately plagued by worries: what if she gets fired? What if her children are upset? Her thoughts begin to swirl in an irrational and negative direction, and she interprets the situation as being really serious. Much worse than those around her believe it to be. Jane tells her it's not that bad. But it is for Lisa. Her feelings (fear and worry) and interpretation ("I'll be letting down either the company or my children") is Lisa's experience of the strain.

- **Reaction**

Lisa responds as if she were facing a major threat. She has a short fuse, she snaps at her colleagues and has difficulty concentrating. She can't cope with things. She withdraws social-

ly at work and believes it's best if she stays home until she gets better. Lisa's reaction shows classic early signs of stress.

Acknowledge the experience

We *interpret* and *tackle* situations quite differently. Something you think is problematic may be experienced by someone else as quite straightforward. Some people feel pressure due to a delayed flight, because they don't know when the next flight is leaving. Others experience pressure when their diary is too full, because how are they supposed to have time to drop off and collect their children? For others again, the idea of a big presentation at work can cause them to go off course – what if they say something wrong?

The ways we react when we experience being under pressure have many common traits, but early stress reactions are always rooted in our individual interpretations. We can experience the same situation very differently and, therefore, we also react quite differently to it. Maybe, as you were reading about Lisa, you thought “*Really? It's only three workshops*”, but that isn't how Lisa experiences it. She is afraid of being fired, despite there being no external indication of such a reaction. Her boss hasn't said anything. The customer hasn't said anything. And Lisa's children haven't commented either. In fact, they are completely unaware of the situation. The scenarios are solely the product of Lisa's imagination. Although she usually copes with having a lot of things on her plate, she is now practically in overdrive. With every hour that goes by, her irrational thoughts take over more and more. The onset of stress is characterised by developing an increasingly

irrational way of seeing a situation. And this often happens when we are left alone to ruminate on our thoughts.

What you, as a manager, think of the situation, whether you can *understand* your employee's thoughts and feelings, and whether you think the situation is a pressurised one, is really immaterial. Your employee's experience of pressure isn't up for discussion. When your employee experiences pressure, then that's how it is. But you can ask and talk to your employee about the interpretation that has led to their reaction, and help them solve the problem that way. Managers who are able to accept this premise can increase wellbeing and job satisfaction and prevent stress among their employees. So be quick to notice behavioural changes and be sincerely interested in how your employee is experiencing a situation.

WHEN SHOULD YOU BE WORRIED?

As we have said earlier, you can't count on an employee coming to you of their own accord and telling you they are showing early symptoms of stress. In addition to the lists on pages 42 and 44, you also need to be aware of whether an employee:

- Has difficulty adapting
- Is showing resistance
- Seems unsatisfied or negative
- Is avoiding taking on assignments
- Is pushing themselves unnecessarily
- Is acting inappropriately in social situations
- Is losing themselves in details rather than looking at the bigger picture

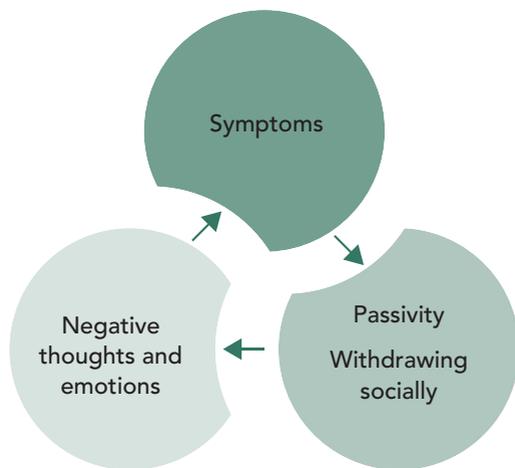
Negative thoughts

Although Lisa's reaction is quite normal, it isn't completely harmless. Lisa's experience and stress response can actually be harmful. Lisa quickly drives herself into a negative mind-set, which only amplifies her responses. This is a typical development in a stressful situation. This is why you should identify the symptoms and address them as early as possible – to avoid those signs being the first step in the development of more severe stress.

One of Lisa's symptoms is irritation: she is annoyed at Jane's "hi", at the lasagne in the canteen, and at the trainee's questions about the printer. She even ends up giving her a hurtful response. But Lisa's real problem is neither the lasagne nor the trainee. She would most likely also have been annoyed had the dish of the day been spring rolls. Something else is behind Lisa's reactions. Behind the snapping and hostile façade, Lisa is filled with negative thoughts and emotions: she's afraid of not being good enough. Afraid of failing. And she is afraid of disappointing her bosses and her children. Her thoughts about herself are undoubtedly negative too. She tries to withdraw socially, first behind a closed door at work and then by staying at home, perhaps in order to protect herself. Such a negative development will at some point cause an employee to pass the threshold of taking sick leave.

Isolation can typically be seen as a precursor to absence due to sickness.

In the figure "The Evil Cycle of Stress" you can see how Lisa's thoughts go round in circles, amplifying the symptoms.



The Evil Cycle of Stress

Lisa fears what others will think of her – her boss, her colleagues and her children. In the aftermath of that fear, the idea of not being good enough comes with a feeling of guilt over ending up in the situation. The guilt weighs on Lisa. She’s afraid both of being fired and of hurting her children. And she is ashamed of that. These are classic feelings that occur in everyone, when we experience symptoms of stress. Emotions are ancient and are linked to humankind’s fear of exclusion from the community.

Four emotions that often occur with stress:

- Fear of the consequences; for example, fear of being fired. And of other people getting angry or upset with us.
- Feeling guilty about being unable to cope with what we think will happen.

- Shame at being unable to live up to our own or others' expectations of being a good parent, colleague or employee. This is almost equal to not being liked and no longer being a part of the flock.
- Sadness – accompanied by negative and worried thoughts about the past, present and future.

Difficult feelings and thought patterns interact with and affect each other. Here is a list of the thoughts experienced by most people as part of the early signs of stress when they are entering a negative spiral of irrational thoughts. When we show the list to those suffering from stress, they often nod and say, “That’s exactly what I think”. And as you can see, many of them are reflected in Lisa. Maybe you recognise them in some of your employees – or you yourself, too?

Typical thoughts

- Do my colleagues still like me?
- Is my boss upset with me?
- Am I going to be fired?
- How can I keep going like this?
- Am I good enough?
- My head can’t take anymore . . . When I turn on the computer, I get dizzy and feel unwell.
- I forget things.
- Will I ever get back to my usual self?
- Maybe I’m just not cut out for this job. Or for any job.
- All my colleagues can do it, so why can’t I?
- What is wrong with me?

- What must other people think of me?
- I can't cope with anything.

The irrational brain

The human brain has evolved over time so it's better able to analyse a problem and achieve a better result. This is extremely smart. It's how we improve, develop and manage to solve complicated problems. But it has a downside: if we experience being under pressure, that same analysis tool will always make us compare the state of things to something that is better and often ideal. This means that our thoughts will often negatively interpret the situation we are facing in any given moment. And one negative thought quickly leads to another negative thought. If we experience being under pressure, our thoughts will automatically head in a negative direction, which, in turn, brings up negative emotions and physical symptoms. Getting your thoughts back onto a more positive track may require some intervention. This is what Step 2 is all about.

SPOT IT - IN SHORT

- It begins with you as a manager. You must spot changes in your employees – you can't be sure your employees can do it themselves.
- Keep an eye on all kinds of changes; developing stress can manifest as both quite visible and almost invisible, subtle signs in an employee.
- Stress makes it harder to think rationally and talk about what is difficult, and stress also makes it more difficult to ask for help. The longer it takes you to intervene, the harder it will be to make a difference to the employee who is developing stress. And conversely, it's typically easier to achieve a common understanding and move in the right direction if you tackle the problem early on.
- The irrational-suffering-from-stress brain needs *management* and *leadership*. Your employee needs a manager: you. Open your eyes to everything happening around you so you can pick up on any early signs of stress.

One of my employees has said she's worried that a colleague is showing symptoms of stress. How should I tackle this?

If an employee comes to you about a colleague possibly being stressed, you need to listen to them. If you are in any doubt about the matter, it may be a good idea to observe the employee for a short period of time – perhaps 1-2 weeks – while you try to notice whether the employee in question is actually demonstrating some of the behavioural changes mentioned in Step 1.

If you are in doubt, it's also often a good idea to talk to the employee you are concerned about and ask them how they are doing. At times it will turn out they are fine, and then you have erred on the side of safety. Remember that very few employees will be annoyed at their manager asking them how things are going for them, regardless of whether or not there's something to worry about.

My employee is making decisions that are putting them under pressure, and I can see that things aren't going well. How can I prevent this?

You can't always prevent the direction in which an employee is heading – at least, not without them becoming aware of the problem themselves. But you can talk openly about your concerns and make it clear to them that you expect them to take responsibility for their situation and their work, regardless of their decisions. This way, you make the employee aware that they need to be conscious of the risk of a negative development and the consequences it may have. It shouldn't sound like a threat. But you may need to mention it if the employee's work is affected, and make it clear that, as a manager, you have to both help the individual employee and do the best for the entire organisation. There may be a need for several conversations.

My employee says they are fine and denies having all the symptoms of stress I can clearly see. What should I do?

When it comes down to it, an employee knows best how they are doing. If they deny your observations, you can't force them to acknowledge them or agree with you. Talk openly with your employee about your concerns and make it clear that you expect them to take joint responsibility for their situation. Get involved as quickly as possible if there are assignments you need to address together. By doing this, you make them aware that they need to be conscious of both their reactions and behaviour. Sometimes, this is all it takes for the employee to get themselves back on track again. At other times it means you getting involved again at a later date, but by then the dialogue will already have begun.

If you have an employee who is completely unaware that something is wrong, several conversations will often be necessary. Here, it may also be necessary to include some reflections on the person's way of working, where you say something like, "I respect that you feel you aren't well. But I have to tell you that your way of working has changed, and, as a manager, I have to be aware of that too."

Some workplaces have introduced a test to monitor the well-being of the department by getting each employee to answer a set of questions. If there is a decrease in the wellbeing of an employee, they are then contacted by an external professional. What is your opinion of such a tool?

Monitoring is good, but it's important that the employees are aware of the goal behind it and experience it as a supportive measure and not as a form of control and pressure. Because that in itself can lead to stress. And the employee being contacted by

someone who has no connection to the workplace and who may not even be in contact with the employee's manager isn't optimal either. The first person to contact an employee who is showing reduced wellbeing should be someone from inside the organisation, ideally the employee's immediate manager. It is the manager who has the possibility of making practical changes at work.

We are sceptical of the general spread of tests that don't actually lead to either a dialogue between the manager and the employee or to the curiosity and sincere interest that are needed to understand the employee's experience.

Having knowledge of stress and an opinion of stress isn't effective stress prevention management.

Effective stress prevention management requires the right action at the right time.

And it starts with employers and managers.

Stress is on the increase. But sending stressed employees home for peace and quiet, so they can recuperate, is not the answer.

For the past 17 years, Helle Folden Dybdahl, Jesper Karle and Lars Aakerlund have been working intensively with both the treatment and prevention of stress. They have advised leaders, managers and employees across Europe and all types of organisations - both public and private - and they've learned that the sooner a person receives the right help to deal with stress, the less effort is needed and the better the result. It all starts with leadership and management in the workplace. Not just in theory but in practice too.

I'll do it tomorrow - 4 steps to stress prevention management debunks a number of myths about stress. Through 4 effective steps the authors demonstrate how the relationship between a manager and an employee is the place to start to break the stress curve - something no one has managed to do yet.

I'll do it tomorrow - 4 steps to stress prevention management presents what you need to know about both your employees and yourself when it comes to dealing with stress. It shows you how you can contribute to preventing stress through your management and leadership, whether you are a manager in the public or private sector.

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