A Guide for Managers

Taking the Stress out of Stress

MANAGERS

BKK®

The project "Psychische Gesundheit in der Arbeitswelt – psyGA" (Mental Health in the World of Work)

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BKK Bundesverband, Essen/Germany

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– Berufsgenossenschaft Nahrungsmittel und Gastgewerbe BGN, Mannheim
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– Bundesagentur für Arbeit, Nürnberg
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   in der Europäischen Union e.V., Essen

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Foreword

Service and stress instead of industry and hard physical work"? If you wanted to achieve as powerful a summary as possible, you could accurately outline the change in the world of work with this one sentence. Anxiety disorders, depression or burnout syndrome are today just as much part and parcel of our modern – service-oriented world of work as hard physical work and work accidents are elements of industrialisation. Nowadays, everyone is talking about the subject of mental health – in one place, you can read the statistics of the health insurance funds about rising absenteeism rates due to mental problems, elsewhere about increasing stress and its consequences.

For the world of work, this means the need for proactive health management. It addresses measures for health promotion and prevention just as much as action with which workers suffering from mental disorders are helped in everyday working life and with their care and rehabilitation. The company health insurance funds have wide-ranging experience in workplace health promotion and prevention. For many years they have been supporting companies with appropriate services and advocating a modern company health and HR policy. We are convinced that the mental health of managers and workers not only boosts the company result and helps to improve the efficiency of our health system but also creates the foundation for each and every individual "to enjoy life and survive pain, disappointment and sadness", as the British Heart Foundation puts it so well. In other words: companies and people benefit equally from healthy conditions in the world of work.

In contrast to physical disorders, however, mental illnesses can often not be detected so easily as they generally involve complex symptoms which may also appear and develop in very different ways depending on the individual. Workers, those responsible for HR and managers therefore frequently feel at a loss and most people find it difficult to speak openly about this subject. A large number of promising and successfully tested tools and action programmes are now available. They show you what you yourself can do in the company to have a positive impact on your mental health. The brochure provides an overview and contains numerous tips and suggestions to put into practice.

I hope that these tips and suggestions will help you to overcome stress.

Heinz Kaltenbach
Director of the BKK Bundesverband (BKK Federal
Association of Company Health Insurance Funds)

Stress: Can you manage the modern epidemic?

You have probably a lot to do at the moment. Your employees are expecting clear instructions and objectives and your superior is waiting for results. Deadlines and meetings are packed into your appointment calendar and the next tasks are already in the pipeline. And then there is always a problem somewhere which cannot be put off, a change that throws all previous plans overboard. Workplace pressures – often accompanied by feelings of stress – have risen tremendously among many workers in companies in recent years. The workload and diversity of tasks is constantly increasing while change and restructuring have become continuous features in many cases.

Employees in modern companies often feel like they are riding a rollercoaster: The speed increases, the twists and turns come upon them ever more quickly and there can be a feeling of lack of control – one of the main contributory factors for stress. Workers rely on their managers to make the right decisions and generally look after their jobs and welfare, yet you as a manager are sitting in the front car of the rollercoaster, where everything is felt more keenly.

This brochure draws upon academic research and practical experience of leading companies to help raise awareness of stress, its causes and effects and offers some guidance on steps you can take to help yourself and your employees cope better with the complexities and demands of everyday working life.

1. Stress and mental health

Stress is a term which is overused nowadays. Almost everyone claims they are stressed. Generally, they simply mean they have too much to do or perhaps not enough time in which to do it. It is vital to recognise the difference between ordinary workplace pressures and the debilitating stress which, allowed to build up, can cause serious damage to individuals and their companies.

When we talk about stress in this context, we are referring to what has been described as a

Condition perceived as unpleasant which is experienced by a person as being threatening, critical, important and inescapable. It arises particularly when the person believes that they cannot cope with their tasks. (Joiko et al. 2010)

Our stressed society ...

This type of stress and its consequences are ever-present in our day-to-day working lives: 32% of Germans say they suffer frequently or even constantly from stress while a further 50% admit they feel stress at least sometimes (Forsa 2009). Many already suffer the consequences of continuous stress. More than one third of employees in the EU report stress-related health problems. Many workers in Germany are of the opinion that they will probably not be able to perform their work under their current demands up to retirement age (Europäische Stiftung zur Verbesserung der Lebens- und Arbeitsbedingungen / European Foundation to Improve Living and Working Conditions 2008; Fuchs 2006).

... and the consequences: personal debility and a fall in performance

Studies have confirmed that stress can rob people of their health. It is recognised that some stress can have a stimulating effect, but usually only in the short-term; continual stress erodes stamina, creativity and health.

While there may be many possible causes of physical or mental ill-health in an individual – for example, depression itself is a stressor – it is recognised that long-term stress can be a main contributory factor in many serious illnesses. They include tinnitus, back complaints, stomach and cardiovascular problems as well as mental illnesses, such as burnout, depression and anxiety.

Naturally, it must be noted here that the connection between mental distress and illness involves a process in which cause and effect cannot be clearly distinguished. On the one hand, there are many factors involved when a person becomes mentally ill. They may relate to the person themselves or to their private or occupational environment. On the other hand, depression itself, for example, represents a stress factor which impairs the efficiency of a person at the workplace.

Is it a threat – or an opportunity?

Stress – like beauty – is in the 'eye of the beholder.' A role or task that one person sees as an interesting and stimulating challenge can have the opposite effect on another. For example, for a passionate speaker, a request to deliver a presentation is an opportunity to perform. But for the person who has had little practice or lacks confidence talking in front of groups, the request will probably lead to sleepless nights.

One thing that modern studies have taught us is that the atmosphere, culture and organisation of tasks in the workplace have a major bearing on whether employees feel motivated or stressed.

Companies where the commitment, performance and health of workers are is excellent are mainly characterised by three factors:

1. The workers have a high level of autonomy over their tasks and activities
2. The social support from colleagues and supervisors is high
3. The workers feel their contribution and commitment is recognised by management in a balanced approach

However, this health-promoting working atmosphere can only arise be achieved if all those involved are aware that they have a share in it – and accept responsibility for their share. How does that look in practice?

They have what it takes…

■ The **employee** *takes positive steps to look after his mental health and increase his ability to cope with stress. They need to take note of which tasks cause them particular stress and cooperate with management and colleagues to find a better way of working. This can include undergoing further training in areas where they discover gaps in their skills and ensuring they integrate breaks, exercise, rest and healthy food into everyday life.*

■ The **manager** *makes a crucial impression on the culture and cooperation in teams and departments through his leadership style. Recognition and respect are key elements. Many studies show that a worker-oriented leadership style based on partnership, fairness, support, cooperation and trust is particularly effective in reducing stress – in contrast to an autocratic style which relies on rigid instructions and control. The manager is also an important role model for employees. He influences the whole working environment with his own style. Managers who themselves place great store in maintaining a healthy balance between work and private life – including a take-up of health promotion initiatives – set an example to the whole team.*

■ The **organisation** *creates the environment in which managers and employees operate. Continuous health promotion is only possible if company leaders appreciate and support the efforts of everyone in the workforce. For example, more progressive enterprises offer a range of further training courses on leadership and mental health and carry out active and sustained health promotion initiatives including risk assessments and staff surveys, implementing the actions identified. Another mark of a caring organisation is the use of modern reintegration programmes which permit employees to join working life again after an illness.*

The following pages show how you, as a manager, can actively influence the stress of your employees and promote their mental health, commitment and long-term work ability. You will learn what structures, tools and people you can expect to support while helping to ensure that, in spite of high demands, you yourself remain physically and mentally fit.
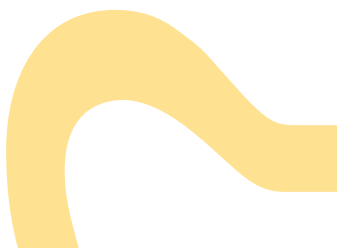
What is mental health?

Health is a "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being", as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO). Lucky – and rare – are those who reach that goal. But the definition does make it clear that physical health and mental well-being belong together. Anyone who does not enjoy mental well-being feels neither healthy nor efficient. Mental health is an indispensable foundation to survive in modern working life and to be able to develop yourself professionally and personally.

> *"Mental health is the emotional and spiritual resilience which enables us to enjoy life, and survive pain, disappointment and sadness. It is a positive sense of wellbeing and an underlying belief in our own dignity and self-worth."*
>
> *(British Hearth Foundation 2008: Think fit! Think well! A guide to be developing a workplace mental wellbeing programme)*

A question to …
Prof. Holger Pfaff

Professor of Medical Sociology at Cologne University and an authority on working life:

Prof. Pfaff, why is the mental health of workers so important for a company today?

Pfaff: Health is somewhat like a source of energy. Physical efficiency is the basic output but the whole process must be controlled – and that control is exercised by the mind. The mind does not have to work so hard in jobs which have standardised, structured workflows. However, the number of these jobs is decreasing and areas with less standardised, unstructured tasks and workflows are increasing.

These are the so-called knowledge workers. Their work involves taking decisions, optimally deploying energy and abilities, reacting flexibly to changes and cooperating with other knowledge workers at a high level. This requires a lot more mental input. In these circumstances, you have to be mentally healthy. People who have mental problems may continue to work for a long time. However, they are often not the people with good sickness records, who tackle work with enthusiasm or can function well in a team.

Facts and figures for Germany

The cost of mental health problems

– *Mental health issues are growing at an alarming rate.* In Germany, the proportion of mental disorders in *sickness absenteeism rates* has *increased more than five-fold* from 2 % to 11 % in the last 30 years (BKK Bundesverband 2010). Today, they are the fourth largest illness group, and the trend is rising in spite of the overall decline in sickness absence.

– *Mental illnesses are the most frequent cause of early retirements due to ill health.* In the last 15 years, their proportion has risen from 15.4% to 37.7 % (Deutsche Rentenversicherung Bund 2009). The *costs of mental illnesses* amount to just under *27 billion euros per year* (Statistisches Bundesamt / Federal Statistical Office 2009). If the rise in costs continues at this rate, the bill could increase by 20 % to some 32 billion euros by 2030 according to calculations by the Federal Statistical Office.

– *Damage to the economy* owing to sickness absence, invalidity or premature death is esti-mated at around *763,000 lost years of employment.* That represents a rise of more than 23 % in the last six years (Statistisches Bundesamt / Federal Statistical Office 2010).

However, the benefits of workplace health promotion and prevention activities are starting to show. An evaluation by the "Initiative Gesundheit & Arbeit / iga" (Initiative for Health and Work) of several hundred studies concluded that *costs can be reduced and the health of workers improved through properly constructed and implemented health promotion initiatives.* A reduction in absenteeism rates and associated costs of between 12 % and 36 % was achieved in through such measures. The "return on investment" ranged between 1 : 4.9 and 1 : 10.1 for the costs of absentee-ism and between 1 : 2.3 and 1 : 5.9 as regards the savings in the costs of illness (iga Report 13).
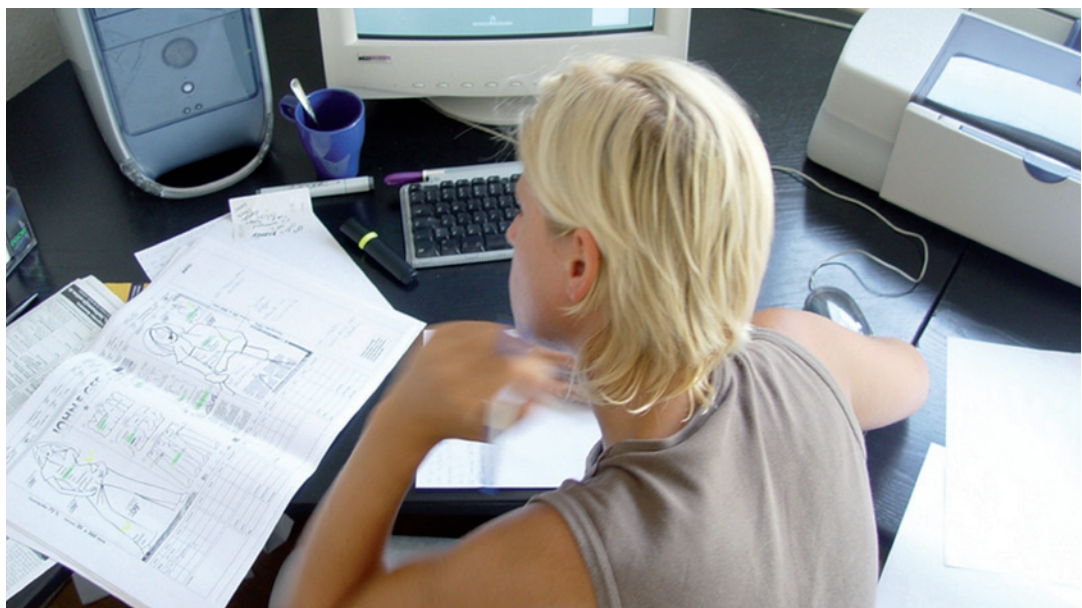
Managers – are you fit for purpose?

Stress and mental health issues are important to you as a manager. Your responsibilities include reducing stressful situations wherever possible and giving employees who are showing the first signs of stress appropriate support. At the same time, you must consider your own health. Your job demands are likely to be even greater – and you may well have to deal with sensitive conflicts between the differing needs of the company and its employees. Check the situation regularly: How stressed are you? How stressed is your team?

"I have to look after myself! – otherwise I could not tend to anyone else", is the conviction which keeps managers healthy and efficient in the long term, explains Professor Matthias Burisch, an expert on stress. By contrast, if your attitude is: "I place the highest demands on myself", then you could be programmed for burnout (Burisch 2010).

Self-test – the first step
My personal stress level

It is not easy to distinguish between whether you are just a bit overworked and ready for a holiday or whether stress is making you ill. Here you will find some typical symptoms indicating whether your stress load could already be resulting in chronic fatigue or physical illness.

☐ I have no problem in getting to sleep. But I often wake up in the middle of the night and start to brood about things.

☐ I have considerably less energy than before for leisure time, hobbies and family. I generally do not take the time for this. I simply haven't the time.

☐ I frequently avoid personal contact with my employees because that takes too much time/is too exhausting.

☐ I have more physical complaints than before, e.g. headaches, stomach/bowel problems or tension. My doctor cannot find any physical causes.

☐ I find it relatively difficult to switch off after work. Often I don't succeed at all.

☐ To be quite honest, I drink more alcohol than is good for me.

☐ One weekend is barely sufficient to recover.

☐ Recently I have found it difficult to concentrate on my work. Incoming e-mails or disruptions easily distract me and I find it difficult to get back into the subject again.

☐ If something at work does not go as well as I imagined it would, I often react with a feeling of resignation.

☐ Time pressure, responsibility, inquiries – I often feel like the famous "hamster in its wheel" which keeps running but never gets anywhere.

☐ To be quite honest, I have an internal resistance to my work which I overcome again every day. However, I then function well again in everyday work.

☐ I suffer from mood swings: sometimes I do not even know who I am, for example when I react in an irritated manner.

Recognise the pattern?

If you have ticked *three or more statements,* you are probably showing signs of overwork and fatigue due to continuous stress. Your mind is reacting in an irritated and defensive manner, your body is sending out signals which say: that's too much for me!

If you have ticked *five or more statements,* it is probably confirming what you already feel – that stress is getting on top of you and robbing you of energy, commitment and well-being. Read on for some concrete ideas of what you can do to reduce your stress and develop your personal stress resilience.

If you have agreed with *seven or more statements,* you have probably been exposed to stress for several years. Your health may well be at serious risk. It is very typical for strong and performance-oriented people to be able to maintain their work ability for an extremely long time and be able to do their job well even though alarm bells have been ringing in their body and mind for a long time. Take responsibility for yourself. Go to your doctor (or a suitable contact in the company), find out what role stress plays in your complaints and what you must do to prevent yourself becoming seriously ill, possibly heading for burnout.

Further into these pages you will find helpful notes for your everyday working life.

Quick test: What about your team?
My employees' stress level

It is vital to check from time-to-time to establish whether the people who report to you are coping with the demands placed upon them. Continuous stress is exhausting. Motivation, commitment and work results may be suffering. Here are 12 indicators of continuous stress loads:

Do any of them sound familiar?

Answering yes to any of the above statements can indicate prolonged stress in your team. However, if you ticked *four or more statements,* you can assume that the problem not only affects individual employees but the team as a whole is not functioning as well as it might. Commitment and quality of work decline, relationships within the team suffer.

If you found that *six or more points* were applicable, the team is probably already very exhausted. Consequential problems could include bullying or an extreme "work-to-rule" mentality. Some employees are possibly ill more frequently because they have developed stress-induced complaints such as back disorders. Even your top performers could be slowly bending under the pressure.

☐ When changes are introduced, you mainly hear complaints – and remarks like "Not that as well! How are we supposed to manage that?" or "It's all a waste of time!"

☐ We frequently have problems with the flow of information. For example, important information is sometimes passed on to colleagues too late or even not at all. Many tasks are therefore delayed or performed incorrectly.

☐ There are frequent conflicts, competitive situations and quarrels among my staff.

☐ The sickness rate in our team is high.

☐ I am always ready to discuss work issues but there is simply not the time for personal talks with employees.

☐ It is often not clear in our team who is responsible for what task. Work and projects are frequently pushed from one person to another.

☐ When I meet a group of employees, I sometimes have the feeling that they stop talking.

☐ I often have the feeling that I have to check the results of my employees' work to ensure it is in fact performed properly.

☐ Even my good workers have recently been acting more often as if they were not quite on the ball

☐ It has already happened that my employees have learned "through the grapevine" and not from me that changes in the team or dismissals are imminent.

☐ My employees have no time for further training. Ongoing operations simply do not permit this.

☐ Some people in my team would prefer not to have company outings and Christmas parties.

2. Leadership and mental health

What can I do about it?

In order to support the mental health of your employees, you as a manager need to take action in three inter-linked areas:

1. *Actively strengthen employees' resources (health promotion)*

2. *Tackle sources of continual stress (prevention)*

3. *Support employees affected with assistance and solutions*

The most powerful resources are natural

Resources are the means available to us to cope with our tasks. From our personal resources, we literally derive the energy to perform our work and fulfil requirements. Ideally, our resources are strong enough to satisfy the demands placed on us and able to develop so that we remain healthy in the face of increased pressures. However, sometimes our resources are – barely adequate and instead of developing to meet fresh challenges, we end up being drained by them. This leads to continuous stress and in the long term we constantly lose energy and our health suffers – both physically and mentally.

You will be aware that, as a manager, you play a leading role in determining the working atmosphere and work organisation in your department. As a result, you have great influence on the stress situation in your team. In the best-case scenario you strengthen your team so they feel equipped to meet the demands. In an ideal world, your employees even feel energised and motivated in their work.

The resource pool for sustainability

Personal resources: *Professional qualifications and the awareness of personal strengths and possibilities, as well as knowing how you can maintain and improve your own physical and mental health.*

Social resources: *Support and respect among the team as well as from the manager or supervisor*

Organisational resources: *A health-promoting corporate culture and its practised values such as trust, transparency, participation, systematic HR and organisational development, as well as employee-minded leadership.*

As a manager, you can have a positive impact at all levels and thus strengthen the resources of your employees. If your company is not already at the forefront of employee health and well-being, then seek information, experiences and outcomes from those that are, or from organisations which specialise in developing and coordinating activities in this field. The shared knowledge is itself a major resource.

A practical example

Bertelsmann AG*

"Leadership based on partnership maintains health and increases profits"

Bertelsmann AG, Gütersloh, was the first major enterprise to prove in a study that a leadership style which the employees perceive as health-promoting has a direct and positive impact on the performance of the workers and the earning power of the company. It happened as follows: in staff surveys, workers indicated what "health protection" means from their point of view. Dr. Franz Netta, former Vice President Human Resources, HR and Health Policy, central HR Department of Bertelsmann AG, explains the most important results: "It was discovered that autonomy, i.e. the degree of freedom in personal work, plays the greatest role in an employee feeling supported, in personal health terms, by the company and the management. Following in second place was that the corporate strategy is communicated in a transparent and predictable manner – which impacts on feelings of job security." A comparison showed that the best managed sectors had a sickness rate almost 30% below the company average whereas the sickness rate in the less well managed sectors was 46% above the company average. Prof. Netta: "Therefore, you can say that leadership based on partnership keeps you healthy."

In another analysis, health experts at Bertelsmann AG found out that the same factors which have a positive influence on the workers' health are also crucial for the level of employee identification with the company and therefore for motivation and performance. "A comparison of the 163 largest Bertelsmann companies showed this connection impressively: the companies managed on a partnership basis are also those companies with the highest return on sales. A representative study of the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS) also came to the same conclusion," explains Prof. Netta (BMAS 2008).

"Our experience also shows that ultimately any manager can learn through the company, with the help of training courses, to lead employees in a healthy partnership. Bertelsmann is so convinced of the benefits of this approach that successful managers must be committed to developing such partnerships in order to be considered for promotion."

* Member of the European company network *Enterprise for Health*.
See http://www.enterprise-for-health.org

Check list: Where do I go from here?
Developing strengths

This is how you can strengthen the skills of your employees in dealing with tasks, requirements and stress situations. You can probably even put some ideas into practice today.

■ **Develop personal resources**

– *Everyone does what they can: Anyone who is motivated and has tasks in front of him which he can do and likes doing, can cope with high demands.* It is therefore important for workers to have a realistic assessment of their skills and capabilities – and, if necessary, undergo targeted further training. As a manager, you are the moderator of these processes. If you know the strengths and development targets of your employees, you can assign them tasks precisely and suggest training and development. In this way, you are laying the foundation stone for the resilience and performance of your employees. Stress, which arises through excessive demands or weariness, is reduced. Commitment and identification with activities – and the company itself – grows.

– *Say yes to the company health offer: Every major company offers information, advice and qualifications relating to health, e.g. relaxation methods, back exercises, yoga, stress and time management, work-life balance.* Many people do in fact achieve more balance and health in this way. The only question is: are such offers accepted in the company or are they viewed as cheap frills? You must help to ensure that every employee takes a critical look at his own health actively and practically

– *Respect for life at the end of the day: Respect the fact that your employees can and must relax and switch off and also have other interests outside their work.* Permit them to reconcile work with the areas of their private life where this is possible, for example by supporting flexible working hours and limiting or eliminating out-of-hours contact regarding work issues.

■ **Strengthen social resources**

– *Be a role model: Keep your nerve and stay calm even in turbulent times.* The mood of the manager is transferred to employees. Therefore, you also need to demonstrate a commitment in health issues. Make sure you visibly take breaks during the working day. Support the company's health programmes – actively participate.

– *Strong together: A good team, in which employees help and support each other as a matter of course, can handle a high level of demand. Promote cooperation among your employees. Reward cooperation more than competition. Consider introducing mentors for new employees or give an employee time to tell his colleagues about an exciting conference. Tolerate informal exchanges and foster get-togethers such*

as out-of-hours social events, even in stressful times. It is exactly then that the strengthening of social resources pays dividends.

■ **Strengthen resources through structure and organisation**

– ***Create a culture of respect:*** *In general, the following applies: workers who have a feeling that they are appreciated and respected for their performance and commitment are less stressed and healthier.* Praise by the manager is a key element of respect. Employees appreciate a fair dialogue with the manager based on respect – and from this gain trust, confidence and energy for their work. The amount of time that you invest in these talks therefore pays off many times over. Other indispensable facets of a respect culture are fair pay and the HR policies of the company.

– ***Expand decision-making latitude:*** *Do you know your employees well and how much responsibility each can and wants to assume? – Act accordingly.* Trust your employees to get on with their work. Support them so that they can design their workflows and working arrangements on their own. Studies show that employees have a very good idea of how to organise their work themselves – and when they view instructions from the manager as helpful. This requires a company culture which tolerates mistakes and supports you as a manager in systematic HR development.

– ***Tasks yes – but ones that make sense:*** *Make sure when allocating tasks that they represent a complete unit in themselves.* In this way, work activities are planned with a lot of latitude for action. This employee empowerment, however, only works in the context of a clear and supportive framework.

– ***Targets yes – but ones with a safety net:*** *It is no longer sufficient today to discuss only the end results with an employee.* Frequently, problems arise in the implementation phase, such as when important framework conditions change. Objective-setting discussions should include "What specific steps lead to the target? What does the employee do when things go wrong?" In a well-functioning team you can organise contact with colleagues who already know all about the subject matter. Ensure that you can always be approached when questions arise.

A practical example

SAP AG*

"What does – or can – make me happy at work?"

Dr. Natalie Lotzmann, Head of Health & Diversity, SAP AG: "Our workshops for managers repeatedly show that access to the employee and a healthy leadership style is best achieved through one's own experience. A small exercise can help to achieve this reflexion level. What do I need at the workplace as a person so that I can feel healthy, balanced and within my limits? It quickly becomes clear that enjoyment at work is the greatest protection factor against stress symptoms with its negative impacts on health and zest for life. At the same time, it is the greatest trigger of performance and potential. But when exactly do I enjoy the work? You can apply that to quite specific work situations and ask yourself: what were the framework conditions under which I gladly went beyond what was required of me, perhaps even really got going and achieved more than I originally expected from myself? And what were the conditions under which I fell well below my potential? You develop personal examples for best and bad practice and make a note of the important key points.

In a discussion about the examples you will discover that the key points which govern enjoyment and development of potential at work are largely always the same and do not depend on the branch of industry, company size, education and hierarchical level. I had the trust of my manager and freedom to act. I felt respected and had the feeling that I was making an important contribution. The team spirit was good. The task made sense and I had prospects.

In discussions about this exercise it became clear that what managers find important so that they enjoy their work is the same as what every employee wants. Good leadership ultimately means creating exactly those working conditions for employees that you also want for yourself.

However, this leadership style can only succeed if managers ignore one myth: the manager must know everything, have everything under control and work 100 % on the tasks as well. A more sensible attitude is to use a substantial percentage of the time to lead the staff, see the employees regularly and ask them: How do you feel with your work, in the team? For example, using a points scale of 1 to 10. What would have to change so that you would again feel at 8? How can I or the team support you? Where do you see your development potential? Nowadays, as a manager, you should be genuinely interested and alert, be generous with praise and recognition, regularly face up to the feedback of colleagues and employees but also of friends and family and, in this way, actively develop your personality more and more. Only if you yourself are prepared to grow ever further can you also actively support others in their development and health.

* Member of the company network for workplace health promotion in the European Union (Unternehmensnetzwerk zur betrieblichen Gesundheitsförderung in der Europäischen Union e.V. – UfG).

Tackle continuous mental stress –
reduce, limit, avoid

Everyday work in modern companies cannot be planned completely. Phases of extreme work intensity and workplace changes are normal and mental pressures peak in line with this.

It is better to concentrate on the triggers of stress which you can do something about and systematically reduce them. Remember – 80 % of stress factors are not directly related to the workload and can therefore be addressed, according to Prof. Holger Pfaff, Cologne University.

Check list to reduce stress – How you can make a difference …
How to avoid stress among your employees

■ **Optimise workflows.** *Is considerable time pressure the normal situation at your company? Do individual employees have to cover many different areas of work?* Are some tasks extremely complex or very one-dimensional? The problems caused by repetitive, boring, unchallenging activities can sometimes be reduced through job rotation. On the other hand, those employees having to deal with complex or many different tasks may need your support to set clear priorities.

■ **Establish time-outs:** *One common stressor in modern everyday working life is continual interruption:* e.g. "I only needed 40 minutes to read the project application – but due to frequent interruptions I was still not finished by lunchtime." Undisturbed times which are discussed and accepted in the team may help. Set a good example: establish time windows for a "quiet hour," for instance, which is fixed in your diary, during which you are to be left alone to deal with an important task.

■ **The direct route to the boss:** *If you can see that an employee is becoming overstretched or stressed, you can quickly work out a practicable solution with the person affected – and avoid a lot of stress, mistakes and resentment.* This 'need for clarification' has become more and more frequent, especially in companies where priorities regularly shift or demands conflict. The advice to the manager here is 'be available' to discuss solutions. Tip: If you are often not accessible, set up dedicated 'consultation times' when employees know they can bring their problems to you.

■ **Healthy office:** *How are the workstations designed? Is the environment noisy? Does the air conditioning work? Do staff take a proper lunch break or eat in front of their computers?* The design of individual workplaces and the general environment has a direct impact on stress. Tip: Involve your team in improvements. Identify issues, discuss and agree solutions, decide ownership and allocate responsibilities.

■ **The email avalanche:** *The sheer volume of information reaching every employee can create enormous pressures. It is almost impossible to ignore the dreaded inbox, even if you regularly find that half the emails need not have been sent to you. This again needs to be tackled as a team and company-wide. Learn about and introduce email etiquette – does this person really need to be copied in on this … use 'priority' indicators only where necessary … etc.*

■ **Actively tackle conflicts:** *There will always be differences of opinion between individual employees or even dissatisfaction with your leadership style.* Show that you have an open mind regarding constructive criticism and conflicts – and search for practicable solutions together with those affected. Conflicts brushed under the carpet can develop into an explosive force – possibly resulting in bullying, resignation and formal grievance actions.

■ **Open communications, honesty and transparency:** *Open communications are not only a sign of healthy participation but also play a crucial role in safeguarding quality of work. Honesty and transparency are essential, especially in times of change. Bad news cannot be avoided – a deadline is brought forward, a project lost, people are dismissed – but employees are particularly unhappy if they learn the news first on the office grapevine. Communicate important news without any delay. Rumours, uncertainty and anger can paralyse operations. Be accessible, show understanding and don't take personally criticism directed at you as the management representative.*

■ **Make your presence felt:** *Many managers feel they don't spend enough time with their employees.* Studies say managers spend around 20 % of their time on active staff leadership because of other demands. What would you do if you could spend 50 % of your time on leadership? Allocate more time for personal development discussions? More small talk? Consider which idea requires the least amount of time – and start right away. If you establish a stronger contact with employees, you will save a lot of time in other respects. You will know what is going on in the team, what the mood is and where the stress is.

■ **Make feelings part of your conversation:** *Current attitudes to the job should figure regularly in communications between manager and employee.* "How are you feeling in our team? Any aspects of your work causing you concern? Are there possibilities for improvement? What more can the company or I as your manager do so that you can perform your work in a healthy and committed way?"

■ **Recognise stress and potential:** *Audit and analysis can show what stresses are currently impacting on the physical and mental health of your employees.* Involve the workers, the specialists responsible for occupational safety and health, the HR department and the works council. Explain the objectives, publish the results and highlight the potential for intervention. If you have the feeling that your team is exposed to a lot of stress but the causes remain vague – investigate. Workshops and health circles are also useful forums.

Beware presenteeism

A low sickness absence rate may not indicate a healthy and productive workforce. Presenteeism is the modern term to describe employees who turn up for work despite suffering some form of ill-health. They are usually driven by worries about job security, performance targets, letting people down etc, to such an extent that it constitutes mental distress. The consequence is that employees are physically present but cannot achieve their full efficiency. Their productivity falls and there is an increased risk of errors and accidents resulting from lack of concentration.
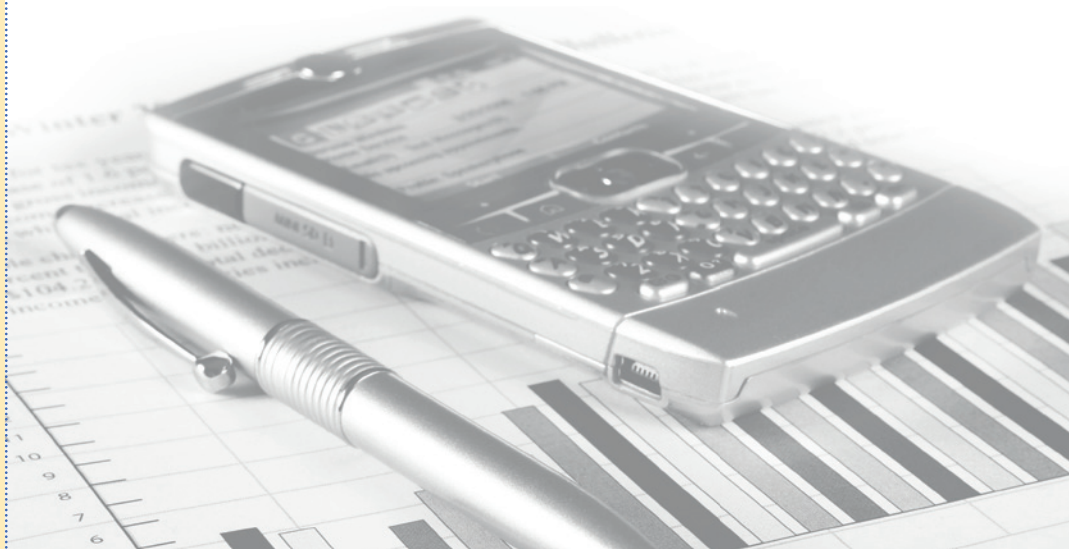
A practical example

Unilever Deutschland Holding AG*
Presenteeism – trigger and remedy

"Our company health survey in 2008 revealed that Unilever lost 21 days per employee per year, i.e. around 10 % of the annual working time, through absenteeism and presenteeism, the ratio being 1 : 3" quotes Unilever company doctor, Dr. Olaf Tscharnezki. "At a cost of 250 euros per day, that's approximately seven million euros. 80 % of those surveyed who appear at work in spite of feeling ill reported of a lot of stress, 60 % suffered from sleeping difficulties and 40 % had something like a depressive mood," Dr. Tscharnezki added. Research into the causes showed that one important reason for the high stress load was "a weakness in leadership".

The management reacted: since June 2010, all managers at Unilever have been attending a 1.5-day training course in addition to the customary manager qualification courses. The topics of the workshop, with many practical exercises and role-play, include resource-oriented leadership, handling change, constructive talks with employees etc. The overriding goal: the cultivation of a leadership style which avoids stress and promotes the emotional commitment of the workers. The initial feedback is positive, according to Dr. Tscharnezki.

In future, there is also to be an active examination of whether the managers tackle problems in a constructive and resource-oriented manner.

* Member of the European company network *Enterprise for Health*.
  See http://www.enterprise-for-health.org

How do I deal with employees affected?

One of the most challenging managerial tasks is how to deal constructively and sensitively with employees who suffer from severe mental stress or who are off sick for a prolonged period because of mental problems.

The first question is how a manager can possibly recognise when an employee is mentally stressed. It can be a very sensitive subject. Then you need to decide what, realistically, can be done about it within the contexts of work and team. Because of these difficulties, the problem is often neglected in many companies. The price for this shortcoming is high: when an employee's condition reaches the point where he is diagnosed as clinically depressed he is generally signed off sick for a long time.

Early interventions by a manager who has recognised the stress warning signals can have a supportive effect. The manager also has a key role to play in smoothing the reintegration of an employee into work after a prolonged period of illness.

Return to work

Almost every manager has, or has had, an employee whose frequent absenteeism has attracted attention. What is not always clear to many people is that the absences may be a sign of excessive demands, accompanied by the initial symptoms of typical stress illnesses. Companies have – or should have – clear policies and procedures which empower and require the manager to talk to employees who are frequently ill and get to the bottom of the causes. If the absenteeism is down to stress, you and the employee can work out what measures are appropriate to improve the situation. If the problems concern his private life, you can still help, for example by explaining areas in which your company can offer assistance. Your interest in and understanding of the situation should on its own help strengthen the employee's confidence and resolve to take action.

Gradual return to work

Gradual return to work regulates the return of a worker who has been off sick for a long period. It incorporates medical rehabilitation. The employee affected is still technically off sick during the period of return to work. Experience in recent years has shown that a return to work after a prolonged period of incapacity frequently fails or succeeds only to a limited extent. After an extended period of not working at all, the return to 'the daily grind' frequently overtaxes people. Gradual return to work, which is monitored closely by the attending doctor, has much better success rates

The manager as a pilot

When dealing with employees affected, in particular during reintegration, it is important for you as a manager to be aware of your position: your function is that of a pilot. You can show employees possibilities, provide them with helpful information, support them with interest and ideas – and in this way help them find the capacity to function and regain their self-confidence.

However, you alone are not responsible for their recovery or the success of reintegration!

Tackling instead of ignoring the problem

Company integration management procedures specify that one of the objectives for managers, especially with regard to employees suffering from stress, is to take a close look and actively bring up the subject as early as possible.

However managers may regard asking questions about an employee "giving the impression of being on edge" for instance, as too intimate. The temptation is to shy away from a possibly difficult conversation. In reality, addressing the apparent problem in its early stages may well help prevent a deeper crisis. Besides, most employees under stress want someone to take a real interest in their problems.

Here are some of the most important points which enable you to recognise employees affected at an early stage and offer support and assistance – without burdening yourself unduly with the other person's problems.

Interpreting signals correctly ...

Changes can be regarded as conspicuous if they contrast sharply with the "normal" behaviour of an employee. An otherwise sociable employee withdraws from his colleagues or suddenly bursts into tears if criticised. Naturally, there are also people who, because of their nature, are anxious, shy or short-tempered. It is particularly important to correctly interpret such behaviour, especially with employees who you have not known for very long. Indications of mental problems may be:

- **Conspicuous fall in performance**: *working extremely slowly, excessive checks of their own work*

- **High absenteeism rates**: *frequent days off, repeatedly coming in late*

- **Change in social behaviour**: *social withdrawal, excessively irritable, exaggerated reaction to criticism, impatient, constantly complaining.*

... and offering support

If you have very good contact with your team and it is customary in your company for people to also talk about private matters and problems, you can ask an employee who appears to you

to be stressed to have a relaxed conversation and openly ask how he is and whether you can do anything for him.

Frequently this atmosphere does not exist. Or you yourself do not feel able to broach this sensitive subject. That is completely normal. Many managers may not have, by nature, the right touch to raise well-being issues or mental problems in a talk with an employee. The subject is still regarded as taboo in many quarters.

There are many training courses and qualifications where you can learn and try out in practical exercises how to broach the subject and, in this way, start up a conversation so that both your employee and you leave the conversation at the end with a good feeling and specific ideas for action.

Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP), usually run by an external consultancy, are operated by many companies. Employees affected by stress often find it easier to initially talk about it with neutral and professional consultants outside their work. In a second stage, any talks can then be held with the superior. This procedure takes the pressure off both parties and frequently results in positive developments in difficult circumstances.
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Support and assistance for employees

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

In the USA, some 90% of major companies offer their employees an EAP. An external consultancy service with qualified staff supports employees with all kinds of problems – professional and private. The scope of the consultancy and subject matter are very varied depending on the provider – as is, of course, the quality. The following consultancy services are included in a comprehensive EAP offering as standard:

Psychological support: Problems of an emotional, personal and work-related nature (life crises, conflicts) are discussed between trained advisers and employees – by telephone or in person (face-to-face). This is not a therapy, but the consultants can help in choosing a therapist and making an appointment.

Advice on practical issues: Everyday problems can subject employees to enormous stress. Which authority is responsible for a certain problem? How do I find an apartment? Who looks after my child/my mother in need of care? The EAP consultants provide advice and information and establish contact with the correct people.

Guidance on work-related issues: Handling stress, time and self-management, in-house conflicts, concerns about one's job, excessive demands, reorganisations and many such problems can be discussed.

Addiction counselling: If the employee is, or may be becoming, an addict (alcohol, drugs), then ways to combat the addiction are explained. Again, the EAP can advise on appropriate professional help, funding matters, doctors, therapy etc.

Designing the return to work process

Employees who suffer from burnout or an exhaustion crisis are generally signed off sick for several weeks or months. Nevertheless, that does not mean that their performance is permanently impaired. On the contrary, crises can also be an opportunity for people to get rid of unhealthy behaviour patterns and attitudes. The motivation to regain a foothold in their profession is often very high among people with stress-related crises because ultimately their work is very important to them. Whether people affected can return to their job depends crucially on good reintegration. Help and support by the manager in this process is indispensable.

Key points of effective return to work

It deserves repeating that, when dealing with employees in these situations, especially during their their return to work, you as a manager must remember your position and function. You can outline the possibilities to the person concerned, provide him with helpful information and support him with interest and ideas. However, you are not solely responsible for his recovery.

We'll keep in touch: The chances of successful reintegration increase if the worker also has a regular contact with the company during the illness period. For instance, offer the employee the opportunity to participate in the development of the company and the team and show that the saying "out of sight, out of mind" does not apply. Discuss with the employee whether, how and with whom he would like to remain in contact during his absence. If the employee turns down this offer, perhaps during an acute phase of illness, it is advisable to pose the question again at a later date.

The direct manager can be considered as the contact just as much as a close colleague, a member of the works council, staff of the works medical service or company social workers. The decision should be made with sensitivity and in consultation with the person affected.

A common cause: Gradual reintegration is not a standard procedure but extremely flexible. The most important requirement is the voluntary participation of the employee. Returning to work can only succeed if the employee himself is motivated. Also, the employee is still regarded as unable to work during reintegration. During this time, he receives income compensation payments from the health insurance fund.

Someone triggers the idea: The idea for gradual reintegration may come from the employee, the employer or from the attending doctors, the worker representatives, health insurance funds, accident and pension insurance bodies. However, the express agreement of the employer is required (it is not an obligation on the company).

Time is important: The duration of gradual reintegration is variable and generally runs from between 6 weeks to 6 months but, in exceptional cases, can be extended to up to 12 months.

Trust is the basis: Cooperation based on trust between the insuree, the attending doctor, employer, worker representative, company doctor, health insurance fund and, where necessary, the medical service of the health insurance funds and the rehabilitation body is a necessary requirement for success. The reintegration agreement is therefore put in writing (exception: provision in works agreements). The agreement describes the start, end and structure of the reintegration plan, provisions for the right to premature return, necessary deviations from the employment contract and the amount of any wage payment.

The doctor advises: The basis of starting reintegration is the doctor's recommendations on the quantitative and qualitative workload. However, during reintegration these recommendations can be deviated from if it appears sensible for the person affected or from a medical point of view.

Flexibility is part of this: As soon as the employee and employer agree on the objective "back to work", the aim is to find an individual approach to this goal; the methods and pace during the process can be repeatedly altered. Being open to this and ready to take action on this point is undoubtedly the greatest challenge to the managers in the company. Examples of good practice can furnish evidence that the effort is worthwhile.

A practical example

Case study – crane driver
„3 years unable to work – and after 5 months back in my old job again."*

A crane driver is showing signs of a mental crisis. Over the next one and a half years he goes for inpatient treatment several times and between these phases of being signed off work tries to resume his job again – in vain. The crane driver remains unable to work, withdraws completely into his home environment.

After two years of being unfit to work, a doctor of neurology suggests a return to work. The occupational medical institute arranges for a specialised psychosocial service to prepare the return to work. They contact the man and build up a relationship of trust over several months. The health condition of the crane driver improves – and the psychosocial service obtains the consent of the employer for gradual return to work and negotiates with the health insurance fund on the financial aspects.

A plan of return to work is drawn up. Those involved are the psychosocial service, the attending medical specialist, the company doctor, a representative of the company's HR department and the health insurance fund. They all sign the plan. As the crane driver is still taking medication at the start of the return to work, he starts work for a limited time with auxiliary activities. From then on, his ability to cope with the workload is to be increased – at the same time, his medication is reduced. The aim: the crane driver is to operate the crane again in five stages and four months.

The procedure in practice

Return to work starts well but the workload for the crane driver is obviously high. Nevertheless, he does not want to reduce his working time further. Owing to his self-confidence which grows with his work he manages to overcome the difficulties. The chairman of the works council supports him as the company contact as well as the psychosocial service. The medical specialist regularly examines the man, can reduce the medication and advocates increasing the working time.

After a good two months of working in full shifts at the "substitute workplace", the occupational medical centre and the attending medical specialist reach a positive evaluation, having obtained advice from a psychological institute. The general occupational medical examination confirms this: the test values for the criteria concentration, attentiveness and reaction speed are good. Nothing stands in the way of deploying the man as a crane driver.

As planned, the employee resumes his old job five months after starting the process of return to work which he masters without any problems and with positive results for his mental stability.

* Source: publication series of Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft für Rehabilitation, vol. 8: Arbeitshilfe für die stufenweise Wiedereingliederung in den Arbeitsprozess.

The example shows: After a prolonged illness workers can return to their job again. The basis for this is the targeted and rapid cooperation of all stakeholders. In practice, the manager frequently assumes the role of the important confidant in the company who supports the employee on his way to becoming fit for work.

A question to …
Prof. Johannes Siegrist

Director of the Institute for Medical Sociology at Düsseldorf University and expert on stress and stress illnesses in the world of work

Prof. Siegrist, what is crucial for the success of return to work activities?

Siegrist: It is crucial for the success of return to work activities that occupational rehabilitation is incorporated into the medical care at an early stage. This means that company reintegration management should start as early as possible. The treatment at the doctor's and psychotherapist's therefore runs parallel with reintegration for a long time – and generally continues beyond it.

The advantage of this overlapping of therapy and reintegration is that, for example, as part of the psychotherapy, the difficulties which arise in contact with working life become an issue. Important questions are, for example, motivation problems or anxieties which may arise. Owing to the parallel procedure, potentials can be optimally identified and strengthened and, at the same time, difficulties can be solved at as early a stage as possible. Long-term studies in the USA showed that the combination of early, gradual return to work with continuous therapeutic support achieves good results.

In this procedure, the managers naturally assume a key role as they continuously support the employee. Managers should train themselves so that they can cope with this task professionally. And naturally the commitment of the company is also called upon – it must accept that the worker needs support and his performance level during return to work is possibly still reduced. Early return to work and support by the manager are crucial.

3. Mental balance for managers

Efficient and balanced

Maintaining mental balance and health is an active process. A manager can rarely decide "from today I will not expose myself to stress any more." Phases of heavy stress are part of the job profile. However, you can do a lot to cope better with stress situations, avoid continuous stress and in many situations do not even allow stress to arise. And you can make sure that personal relaxation and energy replenishment are not neglected.

Previously, we set out ideas about how that can succeed in practice – ultimately, everything that avoids excessive demands on employees also applies to you. On the following pages we have also highlighted some points which create stress especially in the everyday work of managers and provide tips on how you can counter them.

Seven suggestions for your working day ...

... which will help you maintain your efficiency, commitment and zest for life even in times of stress. You will find more practical ideas in the Guide for Workers with the same name.

Experience appreciation: *Start with yourself.* As a manager, you are probably used to viewing your work with a critical eye – and at the end of the day, not everything that you planned has been done. Take a look at the "went-well" list every day instead of the "to-do" list. Actively recall the good moments of the day. That strengthens your mental resilience and sharpens your eye for what is important to you.

Establish and correctly use time-outs: *Studies show that breaks work best for mental recovery if they are taken immediately after a stress load.* One holiday cannot offset months of stress. Particularly effective: regular short breaks over the course of the day. The following applies to after work and the weekend: relaxing is change, doing nothing is not necessarily relaxing. That means exercise for the office worker. Peace and quiet for someone who talks a lot. Something creative as a balance for the heavily structured working day etc.

Reflection and self-awareness: *Never before were personal values and objectives as important for mental balance as today.* Anyone who attaches his values to the objectives of the company may often have to change course. This could leave you disorientated. You would be better to ask yourself: What is really important to me personally? Treating my employees with respect? Further developing myself personally? A balanced life? Consider how you can actively introduce and experience your personal values in everyday working life, given the changing demands and objectives of the company management. Sometimes you have to be creative. In order to look after

your sense of what you want, you need places of reflection – regardless of whether on a walk or in meditation.

Debunking myths: *A lot of stress is created by job myths such as: 'Anyone who is not always available does not want to get on.'* Some more: Anyone who takes his holiday seriously is not committed enough. A manager must know everything and must not make any mistakes… These myths force you into a corset which is stressful and not very helpful in performing your managerial tasks well in the fast-paced everyday life of a modern company. It is better that you orientate yourself to your personal values for "good work". That could look something like this: anyone who wants to perform good work needs time of uninterrupted work. Not knowing something is not a problem – all you need to know is who to ask. It is better to implement a pragmatic solution on time than to search for the perfect solution.

Accept support: *It is often lonely at managerial level.* You have to take many decisions on your own. But if there is no social support, that can cause problems for bosses as well as employees. Accept the offers of your company: they may be regular further training courses in the field of staff management or personal coaching or supervision, giving you the opportunity to reflect on your work in difficult situations. It is a bit like in sport: talent alone is not enough. No high-performance athlete can do without regular training. Train your leadership qualities just as much as your stress competence. What is also helpful: share views with colleagues you trust, such as in professional networks.

Curtail the stress factor, meetings: *Meetings are frequently a waste of time.* Check every request to attend a meeting: What is the agenda? Is the subject really relevant to me? Or is it more a topic for an employee? If the meeting is irrelevant – decline politely. A meeting without minutes and action points is a superfluous meeting.

Optimise delegating: *Specialised questions or detailed problems can often be better solved by experienced employees than by you yourself.* Learn how to delegate. In doing so, make sure there is a win-win situation. Consider: Which of my employees is particularly suited for which task? Who could benefit from a task, develop further from it?
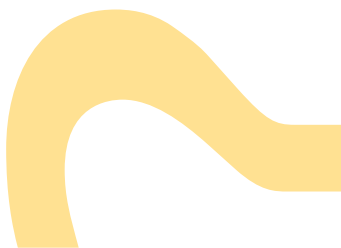
A question to...

Dr. Hans-Peter Unger

Chief physician of the Asklepios Clinic for Psychiatry and Psychotherapy in Hamburg-Harburg and head of groups for managers who have experienced a stress-related exhaustion crisis

Dr. Unger, you meet many managers who experience stress crises. What changes are really helpful to lower stress levels?

Unger: We must be clear about one thing: stress does not go away. Every manager experiences phases of stress. But you can develop an understanding of the reactions under continuous stress – and then change your attitude in dealing with stress phases. In this context you should know that under stress a certain brain structure, the amygdala, is particularly active. The result is well-known tunnel vision, but also emotions such as anger and fear. Under continuous stress the amygdala takes over the "rudder" guiding our actions – and we go into the mode of someone driven and emotionally whipped up. However, that is not helpful for a manager because in this mood you cannot find really good or creative solutions for the stress situation.

You should therefore learn to counteract this automatism by intentionally taking a step backwards and switching on conscious thinking, the frontal lobe. It is only with the frontal lobe that we can answer questions such as: "What is really important at present?", "What is my decision?" Considering, judging, controlling – only the frontal lobe can do that.

You can learn this step of consciously stepping back, for example, by exercising mindfulness, such as simple breathing exercises which prevent you from reacting without reflection to a stressful situation with the stress automatism.

Anyone who manages to step back will also succeed in creating real space for relaxation and regeneration for himself, for example in contact with friends and in a partnership, in sport, personal interests. Gain some distance!

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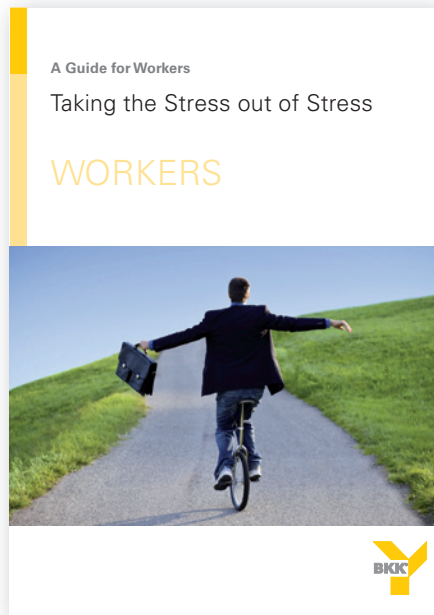- Statistisches Bundesamt (2010). Verlorene Erwerbstätigkeitsjahre, Wiesbaden.

Valuable links on the Internet

- **http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk**
  The Mental Health Foundation have a wealth of downloadable research, publications and resources about workplace mental health promotion, prevention and support.

- **http://www.shift.org.uk/employers**
  Shift are a Department of Health Initiative that have a range of line manager tools and guides.

- **http://www.bhf.org.uk**
  The British Heart Foundation within its Think Fit! Think Well! publications offers both a comprehensive guide to developing a workplace mental wellbeing programme and a simple guide to mental well-being for employees.

- **http://www.beyondblue.org.au**
  beyondblue is an intiative of the Australian State and Territory Governments with the key goals of raising awareness about depression and reducing stigma associated with the illness. It offers a wide range of information and resources for practitioners and experts.

- **http://www.hse.gov.uk**
  http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm
  A number of leaflets can be downloaded from the UK Health & Safety Executive (HSE) website including management standards to tackling stress including audio supported by a thorough stress management toolkit for managers.

- **http://www.prima-ef.org**
  EU programme looking at workplace stress linked to violence including harassment, and bullying.

- **http://www.mentalhealthpromotion.net**
  ProMenPol, a European Commission funded project, identified and gathered useful and practical approaches to the promotion and protection of mental health. Its database and toolkit offers a structured selection of mental health promotion tools. The ProMenPol toolkit provides a process manual for each of the stages of mental health promotion implementation as well as an enhanced search function. The manuals provide step-by-step instructions on how to implement a mental health promotion project from the beginning to the end.

- **http://www.re-integrate.eu/**
  The website supports employers in developing good practice for timely and appropriate return to work. It provides information, methods & training for HR and other Managers on the return to work process.

Notes

psyGA
ein Angebot der Initiative
Neue Qualität der Arbeit

Project publications:

A Guide for Workers

Taking the Stress out of Stress

WORKERS

BKK

Taking the Stress out of Stress
A Guide for Workers

You find the brochures for download
or order in our onlineshop:
http://www.bkk.de/psyga

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