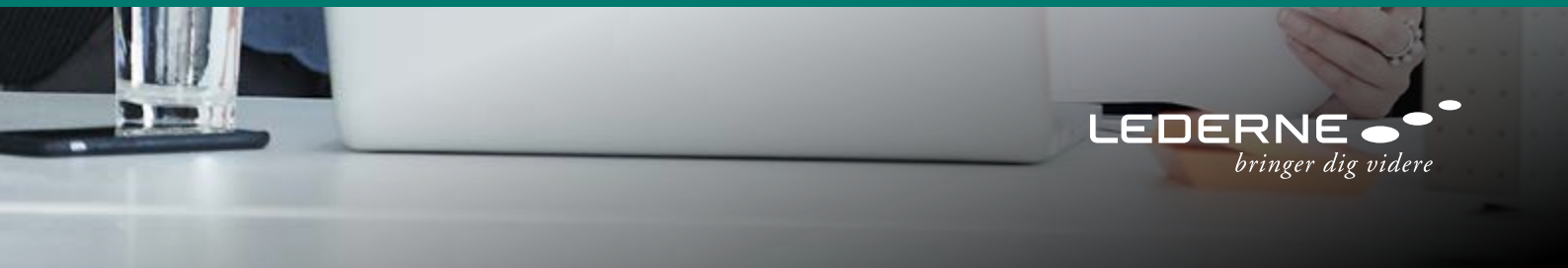




Management Guide

HOW TO SPOT AND MANAGE EMPLOYEE STRESS



STRESS IS STILL A PROBLEM IN DANISH WORKPLACES

Despite focusing more closely on the problem in recent years, we have still not succeeded in reducing the number of employees suffering from stress. 15% of employees in Denmark feel stressed, and the vast majority identify work as a significant cause. Stress can, of course, also be caused by things other than work. But as a manager, you can only do something about your employees' working lives, and so this pamphlet focuses on how to understand, identify and deal with work-related employee stress. Most of the tools and advice provided are also applicable to employees whose stress is wholly or in part due to circumstances in their private life.

DID YOU KNOW...?

- ▶ Seriously diminished well-being reduces working capacity and productivity by up to 25%
- ▶ 95% of all managers see dealing with staff stress as part of their job

(Source: Danish Association of Managers and Executives, 2015)

WHAT IS STRESS?

There is no consensus on the definition of stress, and no official diagnosis. This means that you as a manager must be aware of how the individual employee or the team as a whole uses the word stress. If employees tell you that they are stressed, you need to ask open questions to find out precisely what they mean:

- ▶ How serious is it?
- ▶ How long has it been going on?
- ▶ How is it affecting the employees and their work?

THIS PAMPHLET USES THE FOLLOWING DEFINITION:

- ▶ Stress occurs when people feel that they cannot live up to the demands placed on them for a prolonged period.
- ▶ There are some well-documented risk factors for the development of stress, e.g. heavy workload and lack of social support, to which you as a manager must pay special attention.

The definition shows that stress depends on the individual's perception of their situation, but also that certain conditions in working life heighten the risk. It is not just a matter of thinking differently about the situation.

Always remember that there is a difference between stress and being busy. You can be busy without being stressed – and you can be stressed without being busy.

WHAT TRIGGERS STRESS IN MODERN WORKING LIFE?

Lack of influence, lack of support, high demands, a sense of injustice, unpredictability and time pressures increase the risk of stress. Nowadays, employees often find meaning and identity in their work. It can be a challenge not to immerse yourself too deeply in it.

Many people also deploy personal qualities and competencies at work, e.g. communication skills when talking with clients and colleagues, and creativity and analytical skills when solving tangible problems. In other words, it is not just the employee who comes to work – it is also a human being. Work and identity are interwoven. People often take stress as a personal defeat and find it difficult to do their job properly.

WHY IS STRESS PREVENTION IMPORTANT?

Many managers deal with and reduce stress among their employees for human and ethical reasons. But avoiding stress also benefits the bottom line. Severe stress leads to:

- ▶ Long-term sick leave
- ▶ Lower productivity, even before sick leave. Stress leads to memory and concentration problems, and even minor symptoms reduce working capacity.

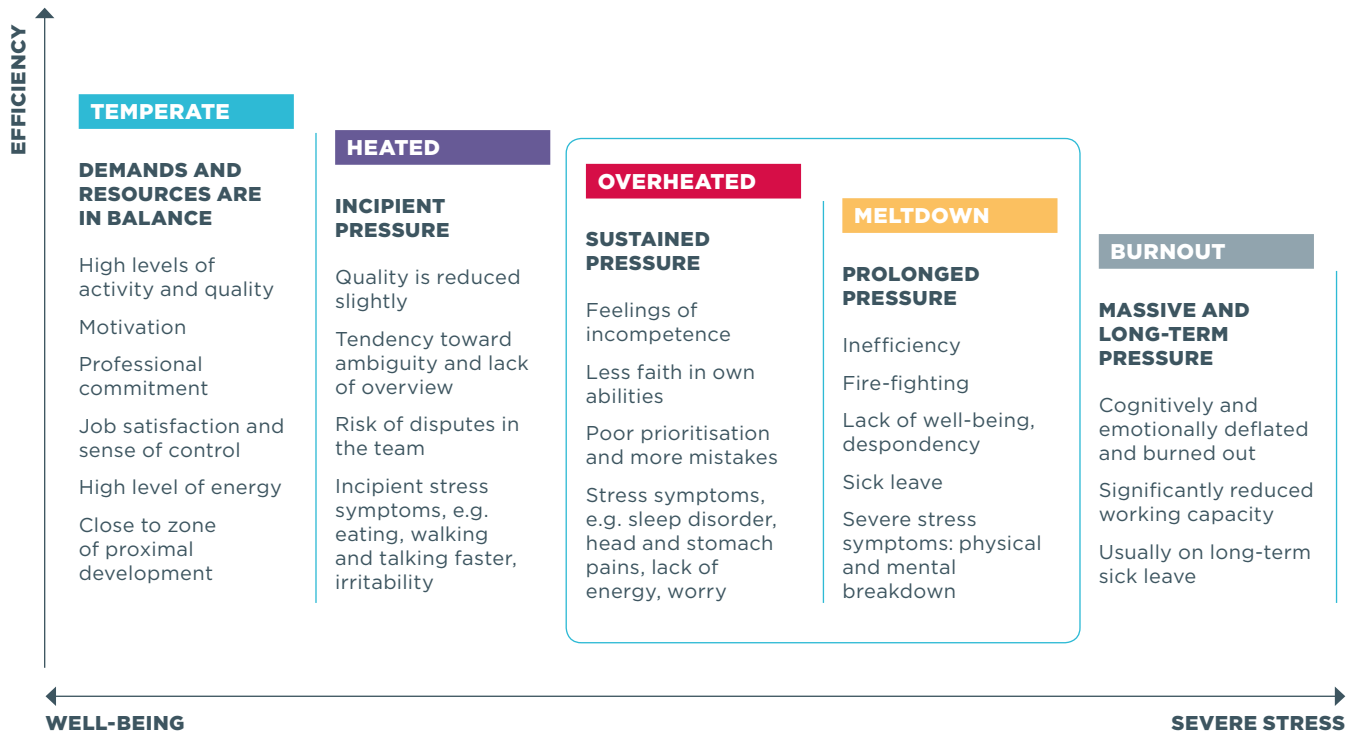
You and the team will find it difficult to reach your goals if stress levels are high. Reducing stress is in everyone's interest.

THE STEPS OF STRESS

Serious stress seldom arises overnight. Rather, stress usually develops gradually over a prolonged period, during which the employee goes from well-being to, in the worst-case scenario, long-term sick leave. The Steps of Stress divide this process into five phases, each characterised by different types of behaviour, symptoms and levels of effectiveness.

Knowledge of the five phases will help you to spot and cope with stress in your staff.

This pamphlet gives you the knowledge and tools to deal with stressed employees in both the overheated phase and the meltdown phase. In these two phases, you are dealing with real stress that will have increasingly serious consequences for both the employee and your department. It is vital that you intervene.





WHAT IS THE OVERHEATED PHASE?

In the overheated phase, employees often exhibit multiple symptoms of stress. These may be the result of a prolonged increase in the number and complexity of the demands placed on them. The symptoms make it more difficult for them to do their work, which further exacerbates the symptoms. It's a vicious circle.

Employees in the overheated phase:

- ▶ often begin to lose faith in themselves and their abilities
- ▶ take stress as a personal defeat.

It is often difficult for employees to ask managers for help, so it is important to keep an eye out for signs that one or more of your staff may be in the overheated phase.

SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR

- ▶ They work longer hours than usual and may send you e-mails at strange times, e.g. in the middle of the night.
- ▶ The way they interact with you changes, e.g. they avoid eye contact and act shifty. Alternatively, they become more impulsive and brash.
- ▶ They seem impatient and pressurised - they emit signals that seem to say 'I haven't got time for this meeting'.
- ▶ They have inappropriate priorities. Important things are forgotten and less important ones are given too much attention.
- ▶ They jump from task to task. They may get wrapped up in insignificant details because they have lost all sense of proportion.
- ▶ They make progressively worse decisions.



BE AWARE OF THE EXCUSES YOU MAKE

Managers are often uncertain about their concerns, or even resist acting on them. This is highly understandable. As a manager, you may feel that you are crossing an invisible line. If you do not feel equipped to deal with a stressed employee, then this may delay the urgent action you need to take.

Managers typically make the same four excuses not to intervene:

1. I do not know what to do. I might do more harm than good.
2. I cannot allow myself to interfere. The employee probably does not want my help.
3. Other colleagues will help – they are better placed than me.
4. It is not my responsibility. Employees are adults who are paid to work, so they should find their own balance.

It is important that you are aware of the excuses you automatically make to yourself. This will help you to find the courage to intervene. It is part of your job as a manager. The following pages show you how to cope with and help stressed staff.

AVOID SICK LEAVE

Whenever you have an employee in the overheated phase, it is important that you act. You may even manage to avoid them signing off sick. To do this, you have to do something about the duties and working hours that have triggered their stress. You should also look at the balance between demands and resources in general, in order to prevent any future need for sick leave.

MANAGING THE OVERHEATED EMPLOYEE

Managing the overheated employee is very much about relieving some of the pressure and ensuring good social support.

There are three ways of doing this:

1. Open up dialogue
2. Take control
3. Provide social support and, if necessary, seek professional help.

OPEN UP DIALOGUE

Inform any stressed employees that you want to talk to them about their well-being. This means that they will not be alarmed or worried when an invitation pops up on their calendar or when you ask them to come into your office for a chat.

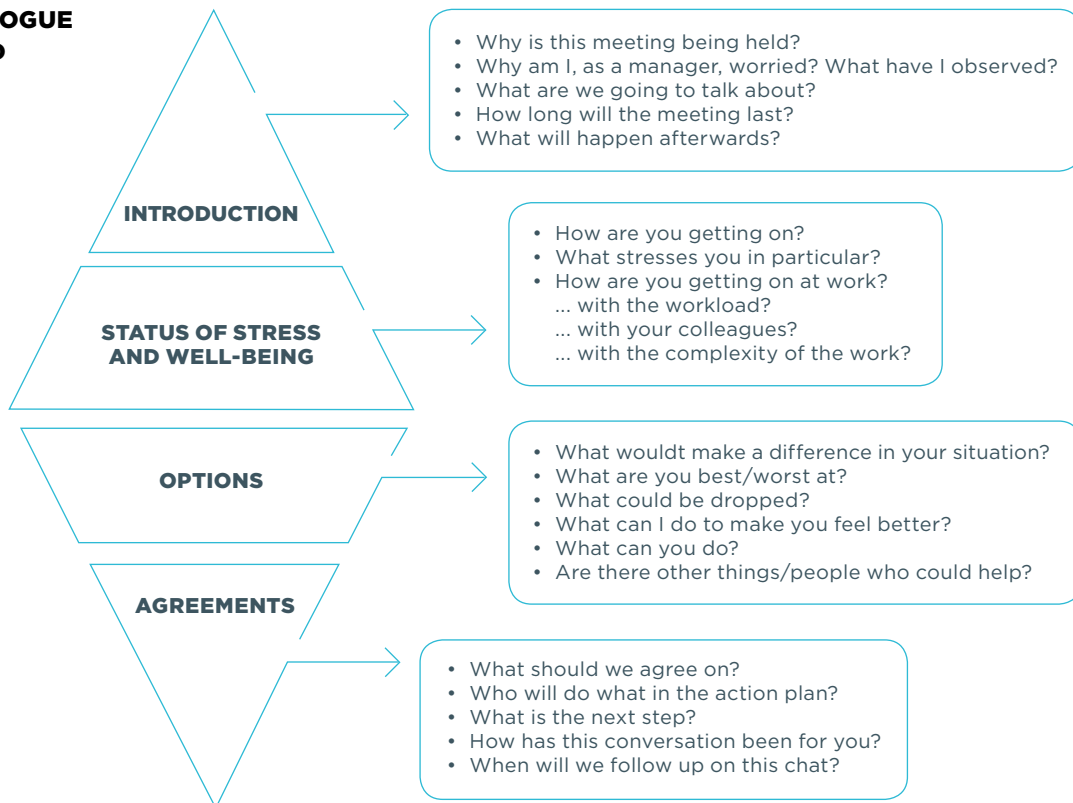
THE DIALOGUE

- ▶ Set aside around an hour for the dialogue.
- ▶ Tell the employee about your concerns and put into words what you have noticed. Take your observations seriously, even though the employee may initially reject your concerns.
- ▶ Ask about their well-being and examine how they feel about their workload.
- ▶ Determine which tasks and projects are causing particular strain, and which they find especially difficult. What is the main problem – the number of demands, the complexity, the pace, working relations with others, or something completely different?
- ▶ During the dialogue, you must deploy both your empathy and your managerial authority. You must listen, show understanding of, interest in and respect for the employee's perception of the situation – but also keep in mind that it is your right and duty to intervene.

You may wish to structure the interview in four parts – each of which has its own purpose. This model enables you to structure a potentially difficult conversation and ensure that you cover all of the right subjects.



THE DIALOGUE DIAMOND



TAKE CONTROL

Some overheated employees may find it difficult to acknowledge the severity of their situation. They still hope that it is just a passing phase, and see your help as a defeat. Sometimes, it is also hard for the overheated employee to let go of exciting, high-prestige tasks that are a source of both stress and excitement. You may well find that your offer of help is rejected. But a person in the overheated phase needs help urgently.

You must clearly assert your authority and temporarily take control of the employee's duties. Once they have swallowed their pride, the vast majority of employees will see this as a great relief.

MORE MANAGEMENT

- ▶ Set out your expectations regarding working time and duties while the employee is overloaded, e.g. times when they should not be working or checking e-mails.
- ▶ Establish clear priorities with the employee, and relieve them of certain tasks: What tasks should they continue to work with? What tasks should they not focus on at the moment? What tasks should be taken away from the employee?
- ▶ Go through the diary with the employee and insist that they drop unnecessary meetings and activities.
- ▶ Agree a weekly follow-up meeting at which the diary, working time and duties are discussed and adjusted until the stress level has been reduced significantly.

PROVIDE SOCIAL SUPPORT AND, IF NECESSARY, SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

SOCIAL SUPPORT AT WORK

Social support also plays a key role in dealing with stress. Find out who is able to provide support for the employee, both at work and at home.

- ▶ Maybe some of the other members of the team could go out of their way to socialise more with their overheated colleague, e.g. by acting as a sounding board and helping with the workload.
- ▶ One or more colleagues could act as a 'break mate', to ensure that the overheated employee takes breaks during the day for the foreseeable future.
- ▶ Does the employee have someone in their private life to whom they can talk?

PROFESSIONAL HELP

If it proves difficult to get the overheated employee to talk and to agree to specific solutions, you may have to recommend that they seek professional help, e.g. from an experienced HR professional or business psychologist. Your company or organisation may even have an insurance policy that guarantees employees immediate help of this kind.

However, it is crucial that you do not relinquish all responsibility to the HR professional, psychologist, etc. You must continue to actively participate. If possible, hold meetings where you, the employee and whoever is providing the professional help gather to discuss and agree on the workload, content, time, etc.



WHAT ARE YOU ALLOWED TO ASK?

The law stipulates that you must not directly ask the employee to identify any health problems they may have. However, you are allowed to ask whether their health problem affects their work, and how. This information will enable you and the employee to work together to adapt the work to

suit the individual's condition and situation. In practice, most employees will tell you that they are stressed, strained, exhausted, under pressure, etc. – but remember that you are not allowed to pass this information on to colleagues without the employee's consent.

HOW TO SPOT A MEMBER OF STAFF IN MELTDOWN

WHAT IS THE MELTDOWN PHASE?

Meltdown is the fourth phase on the Steps of Stress. Employees in this phase will often take more time off, and make more and more serious mistakes while at work. They will either waste time on irrelevant details, or juggle multiple tasks without finishing any of them.

Their behaviour towards you and the rest of the team is unpredictable, and you get the feeling that something is very wrong. People in the meltdown phase often know that their situation is out of control, but are unable to do anything about it.

BE AWARE
THAT POOR
PERFORMANCE
MAY BE CAUSED
BY STRESS,
RATHER THAN
LACK OF ABILITY!

SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR

- ▶ The employees' worries about work or their own situation are exaggerated and disproportionate.
- ▶ They seem increasingly frantic and confused in their contact and communication. Or they may try to avoid you, colleagues, breaks, meetings and social occasions.
- ▶ Their work becomes increasingly unstructured and incomplete. Assignments are submitted with large gaps and important parts missing. Deadlines are missed – or perhaps even forgotten entirely.
- ▶ They suffer from poor memory, and may be inattentive during meetings.
- ▶ They may be incapable of taking decisions
- ▶ They are off sick more often.
- ▶ They suddenly break down crying.

HOW TO HELP AN EMPLOYEE IN THE MELTDOWN PHASE

It is essential that you talk to the employee concerned and that your talk results in tangible and clear agreements. You may wish to use the dialogue model on page 9. In order to guarantee clear agreements in key areas, you may wish to use and complete the form along with your employee.

After each meeting, note in detail what has been agreed with regard to working hours, tasks, interactions and relationships, information and follow-up.

YOU ARE THE EMPLOYEE'S FILTER

The employee may be very relieved that somebody is finally acknowledging their stress. As a result, they may find it difficult to filter the information they share with you. You effectively act as their filter – you must place limits on what they share with you. This should, of course, be done in an appreciative and empathetic manner – you should demonstrate understanding of the fact that they need to talk, but emphasise that there are some matters about which they should talk to other people. Instead, offer professional help or ask if they have someone in their private network with whom they could talk.

THEME	AGREED DD/MM/YY	AGREED DD/MM/YY	AGREED DD/MM/YY
Working time			
Work tasks			
Interactions and relationships			
Information			
Follow-up			

TALK ABOUT AND MAKE CLEAR AGREEMENTS ON THE FOLLOWING

WORKING TIME

- ▶ You must reduce the employee's working hours. Consider part-time sick leave. There may also be need for short-term full-time sick leave, e.g. a couple of weeks.
- ▶ Talk to the employee about whether they should stay at home two days a week, or instead work just four hours a day.

WORK TASKS

- ▶ You must reduce the employee's duties in terms of both number and complexity.
- ▶ Remove assignments with tight deadlines, highly complex tasks, high-prestige projects and tasks that require them to work with others.

INTERACTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

- ▶ Are there challenges and pressures within the team? Are there disputes? With whom is the employee most at ease? Could they work together more often?
- ▶ Are there customers, patients or citizens that the employee should not have to deal with?

INFORMATION

- ▶ Who among the employee's colleagues and customers needs to know about your agreements? Who is affected and what do they need to know?
- ▶ Who will say what to whom?

FOLLOW-UP

- ▶ Always agree when you will talk together again. Arrange weekly follow-up meetings at first.
- ▶ Evaluate your agreements, adjust them regularly and note this in the table.



SICK LEAVE OR NOT SICK LEAVE - THAT IS THE QUESTION

There are many opinions about whether sick leave is helpful – or even harmful. Whether an employee in the meltdown phase needs full-time sick leave depends very much on the extent to which the workplace is accommodating and flexible. Consider whether part-time sick leave might be better in the short term. If the employee is badly hit by stress and is suffering multiple acute symptoms – especially severe sleep problems – then short-term, full-time sick leave may be appropriate for a couple of weeks. However, you should maintain contact with the employee during this period.

FIT-TO-WORK CERTIFICATES

Fit-to-work certificates are drawn up by you, the employee and their family doctor.

A fit-to-work certificate consists of two parts:

1. The first part is completed by both you and the employee. The focus is on specifying what the employee can and cannot cope with. Proposals for the number of hours worked during the return-to-work phase are also listed.
2. The second part of the certificate is completed by the employee's GP, along with the employee. The doctor assesses whether the plan is realistic and will often specify for how long the new duties and working time will apply.

The employer pays for the certificate. Read more about fit-to-work certificates and download examples from www.star.dk.

REMEMBER THE TEAM

An employee who is in the overheated or meltdown phase may pose challenges for the rest of the team. Up to the point at which you take action, the team may have been doing extra work to compensate for their colleague's reduced working capacity. The fact that their colleague has been unable to meet targets and live up to agreements may have had an effect on other employees. This may have given rise to irritation and disputes. You and the stressed person typically agree a reduction in working hours, duties and responsibilities for a certain period – and this agreement has consequences for the team. Will they need to work more? Faster? Will there be tasks that will just not get done?

It is important that you as a manager deal with these challenges and recognise the extra effort put in by the team.

YOU DO THIS BY:

- ▶ acknowledging and conveying that you are aware that the team is making an extra effort – and that you appreciate it
- ▶ informing the team of the agreements made between you and their stressed colleague
- ▶ prioritising work in the department and team – what has to be achieved and what is impossible to achieve while an employee has reduced work capacity?
- ▶ exploring whether temporary cover is an option
- ▶ dealing with negative moods if they arise within the team.

You may need to reconcile your decisions and changes of priorities with your own boss.

SOCIAL SUPPORT FROM BOTH YOU AND THE TEAM IS CRITICAL FOR KEEPING THE STRESSED COLLEAGUE IN THE JOB. EVERYONE NEEDS TO FEEL THAT THEY HAVE A PLACE IN THE COMMUNITY, ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY ARE STRUGGLING TO COPE.



DO YOU HAVE FREQUENT CONTACT WITH YOUR EMPLOYEES?

If you are to get a sense of your employees' well-being and spot any signs of stress, it is key that you have ongoing dialogue and contact with them. However, this is not always easy, e.g. if you are managing from a distance or the team works on the road. But here are some ways to improve your relationship with your employees:

- ▶ Consider whether your work can be organised differently, so that you are in more regular contact with your employees - even those who work at odd times.
- ▶ Consider whether it would help if you kept a record of your interactions with employees. Perhaps there are people with whom you interact only rarely - or not at all.
- ▶ Remember to make it clear to them that if they are feeling dissatisfied, they should come to you before things get really bad.
- ▶ Designate staff members who have a special duty to keep track of their colleagues' well-being and bring any concerns to you.
- ▶ Work more closely with the shop stewards or health and safety representatives at your workplace, if you have them.

WHO CAN HELP?

Spotting and dealing with employee stress is complex and time-consuming. You need to know who is capable of acting as a sounding board and helping you. Use both internal sources – resources within your own organisation – and external ones.



INTERNAL RESOURCES

SENIOR MANAGEMENT

Seek advice from your own bosses and use them as a sounding board. They have wider experience of the organisation – and may be able to put you in contact with relevant people who will provide you with inspiration for how to deal with the situation.

YOUR MANAGEMENT COLLEAGUES

The vast majority of managers have at some point had stressed employees. A management team is therefore a repository of relevant experience. Use either your own management team or an external network as a sounding board, both generally and in relation to specific cases. You may wish to take turns presenting an anonymous case once a month.

HUMAN RESOURCES

If your workplace has a human resources department, it almost certainly has experience of managing and preventing stress in the organisation. The HR officer will often act as a sounding board, and will sometimes be able to deal with specific cases in your department.

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

DANISH ASSOCIATION OF MANAGERS AND EXECUTIVES

Members of the Association can seek help and advice on our site www.lederne.dk. We also offer advice and act as a sounding board if you need help here and now. See more at www.lederne.dk.

THE EMPLOYEE'S DOCTOR OR PSYCHOLOGIST

Some doctors and many psychologists have experience of conducting roundtable talks in companies where both managers and staff are suffering from stress. It is often very helpful to involve a third party. The employee must, of course, consent to this.

THE LOCAL AUTHORITY

If there is a risk that your employee will be off sick for a long time, you may contact the local authority where the employee lives or where the workplace is based. All local authorities now offer a fast-track process that enables you and the employee on sick leave to get help as early in the process as possible. Some local authorities also run other schemes designed to help retain stressed employees.

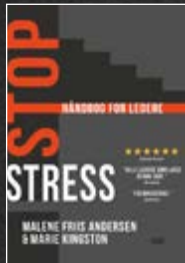
THIS PAMPHLET IS FOR

managers who want to be better at spotting and coping with staff stress.

IT PROVIDES INSPIRATION AND TOOLS THAT WILL HELP YOU TO

- ▶ understand stress and respond accordingly, depending on how seriously your employees are affected
- ▶ spot an employee with incipient symptoms of stress
- ▶ enter into a dialogue with an employee who has been affected by stress
- ▶ retain an employee with incipient symptoms of stress
- ▶ get help – both within the organisation and outside it.

The pamphlet is based on *Stop Stress – Håndbog for ledere*®, Klim (2016). An English edition (*STOP STRESS: The Manager's Guide to Boosting Performance the Scandinavian Way*) will be published in September 2017. Reference should be made to the book when citing or referring to the pamphlet.



Read more about stress and learn about other tools in *Stop Stress – Håndbog for ledere* and on Lederne.dk

The Danish Association of Managers and Executives has a special offer on Danish edition of the book – DKK 220.00, incl. shipping.

Order via e-mail to bestillinger@klim.dk and enter 'Lederne' in the subject field.

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