



Management Guide

SUCCESSFUL RETURN- TO-WORK STRATEGIES FOR STRESSED EMPLOYEES



THE PREVALENCE OF STRESS AND STRESS-RELATED SICK LEAVE

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.

Studies have shown that the number of people on long-term stress-related sick leave is rising, and that up to 40% of long-term sick leave is due to stress. There has also been an increase in occupational injuries and early retirement due to stress-related ailments. Stress is an expensive business, not only for the individual concerned, but for the company and society.

**WHY SHOULD YOU WANT TO GET
EMPLOYEES ON STRESS-RELATED SICK
LEAVE BACK TO WORK?**

Having one of your staff on long-term sick leave can cost up to DKK 1 million. Serving a redundancy notice on an employee who is off work due to stress is expensive, as is recruiting new employees and bringing them up to speed with increasingly complex work processes. As a manager, it is very much in your interest to get people back to work permanently.

As well as the financial aspect, you also have to take into consideration the well-being of the employee concerned – and your other staff. How you cope with an employee who is suffering from stress says a lot about you and the company. Do you give people a chance when they are in a difficult situation? Or do you leave them to their own devices and make them redundant as soon as possible?

Your reaction can have a significant impact on other employees in terms of their loyalty to you and to the company as a whole.

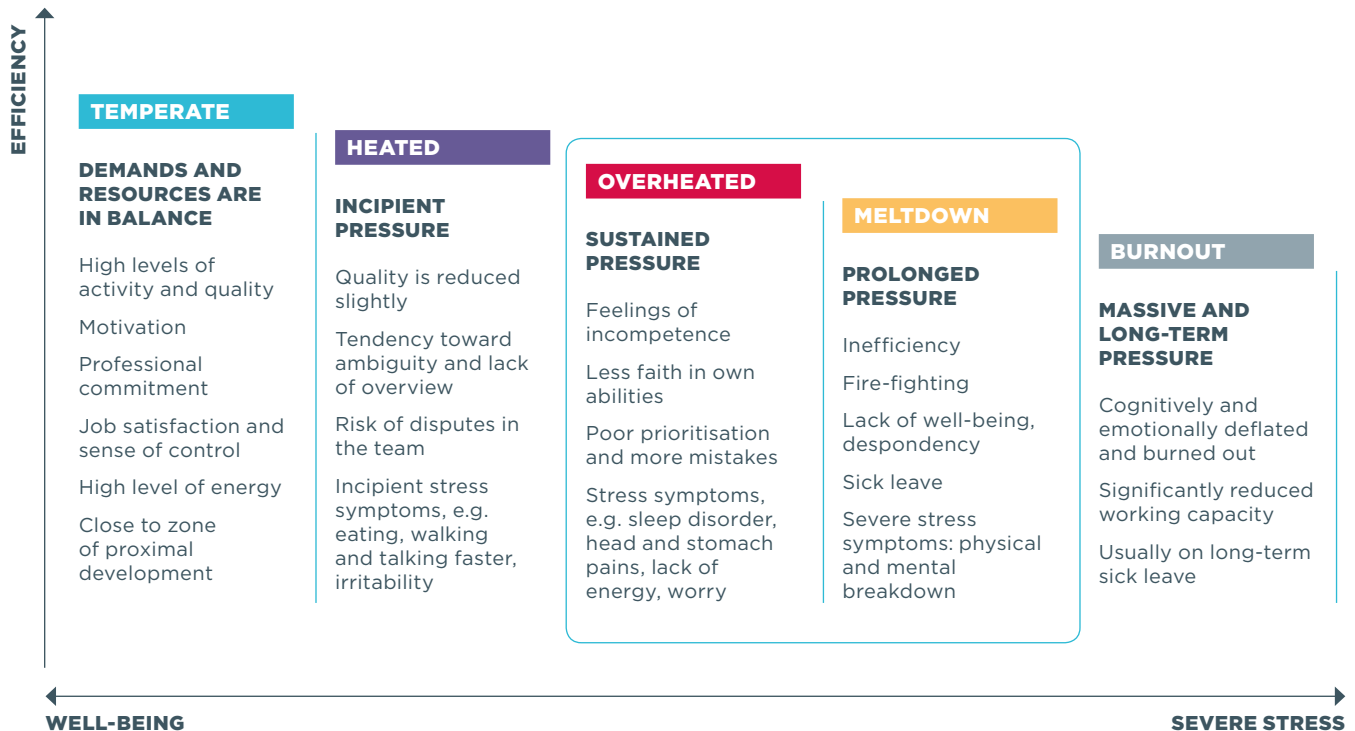
DID YOU KNOW THAT
THE VAST MAJORITY OF
STRESS PATIENTS, GIVEN
THE RIGHT SUPPORT,
ARE ABLE TO REGAIN
THEIR PREVIOUS WORK
CAPACITY AND LEVEL
OF JOB SATISFACTION?

THE STEPS OF STRESS

Serious stress and sick leave seldom happen from one day to the next. 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 phase is characterised by different types of behaviour, symptoms and levels of effectiveness.

Knowledge of the five phases, as well as the management tasks associated with each one, will help you to spot and cope with stressed staff.

This pamphlet mainly provides knowledge of, and tools to manage, employees off work during the burnout phase. The advice and tools presented are also applicable to employees in the meltdown phase who are on long-term sick leave. The pamphlet deals with sick leave of more than 2-3 weeks.





WHAT CHARACTERISES THE STRESSED EMPLOYEE ON SICK LEAVE?

- ▶ Emotional exhaustion
- ▶ No matter how much effort employees put in, they are not able to perform their duties and work with others in the way that they usually do.
- ▶ Employees do not usually develop severe stress simply due to numerous heavy demands. Rather, it is often the case that they have felt for some time that they have been forced to compromise their personality and professionalism.
- ▶ In the worst-case scenario, severe stress results in depression and anxiety.

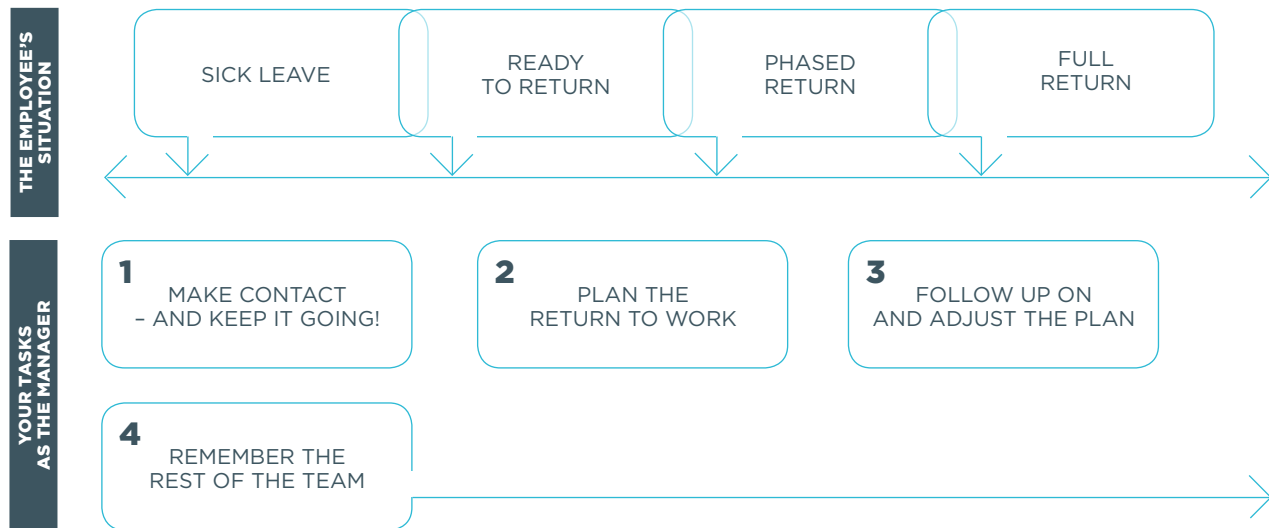
People off work with stress are often ashamed of being on sick leave. They may feel they have betrayed themselves, their colleagues, you and the customers or people they deal with. Stress is often not easy to detect in others, which makes it difficult to document. This can make sick leave even more difficult for the employee to cope with. They worry about the future. They may be afraid of never being themselves again or regaining their full capacity to work. They may also be worried about what you, their colleagues and the customers think of them, which compounds the issue.

In order to get stressed employees back to work, managers must follow these four steps:

1. Make contact – and keep it going!
2. Plan the return to work
3. Follow up on and adjust the plan
4. Remember the rest of the team

As illustrated in the model below, the tasks facing the manager differ depending on which phase the employee is going through.

The return-to-work process is not always plain sailing – it may be blown off course. Employees may relapse, and you may need to repeat some of the four tasks.



YOU KNOW - AND CAN DO - MORE THAN YOU THINK

Bring your management experience and competencies to bear on these four tasks.

- ▶ You are used to communicating, prioritising and creating clear frameworks.
- ▶ You have probably held sick-leave interviews before. You may also have experience of adapting an employee's workload due to other health problems.

Draw on these experiences when helping a stressed employee get back to work, but remember that the individual concerned may also be experiencing a sense of personal defeat and shame.



SICK LEAVE MAY BE NECESSARY

If there is a need for long-term sick leave, it is important that you and the employee do not panic. Long-term sick leave may be necessary in severe cases. In some workplaces, people think that once an employee has been off sick for three or four weeks, they are never coming back.

This is not the case. What is important is:

- ▶ that the employee maintains good contact with the workplace during the sick leave
- ▶ that the company offers a gradual increase in hours and duties on return to work
- ▶ that the employee is offered professional help.

REMEMBER: YOU MUST NOT DIRECTLY ASK EMPLOYEES TO IDENTIFY ANY HEALTH PROBLEMS THEY MAY HAVE. HOWEVER, YOU ARE ALLOWED TO ASK WHETHER THEIR HEALTH PROBLEM AFFECTS THEIR WORK, AND HOW.

It is important that you and the employee are in regular contact, so you can follow up on their situation and offer help. Usually, the individual concerned will take this as a sign that you are interested in them and want them to return to work. However, this does not mean that more contact is invariably better. It is about finding the right balance and frequency – the employee should view it as a source of help and motivation, and should not feel pressured.

A maximum of five sick days should pass before you talk to the member of staff for the first time.

THE FIRST CONVERSATION

The first conversation usually takes place over the phone. It may also be held at the workplace, if the member of staff feels up to it. The conversation may cover the following:

1. Ask how the employee is feeling
2. Ask what you can do here and now that would help
3. Offer professional help, if relevant.
Before the interview, it is a good idea to check whether the workplace has health insurance.
4. Tell them that their work is being covered
5. Arrange a time to talk again – perhaps they might like to come in for an informal visit and a coffee?

You must hold a sick-leave interview within the first four weeks of the employee being off work. The purpose of the interview is for you and the employee to clarify when and how they will be ready to come back to work, and what you can do to make this process as easy as possible.

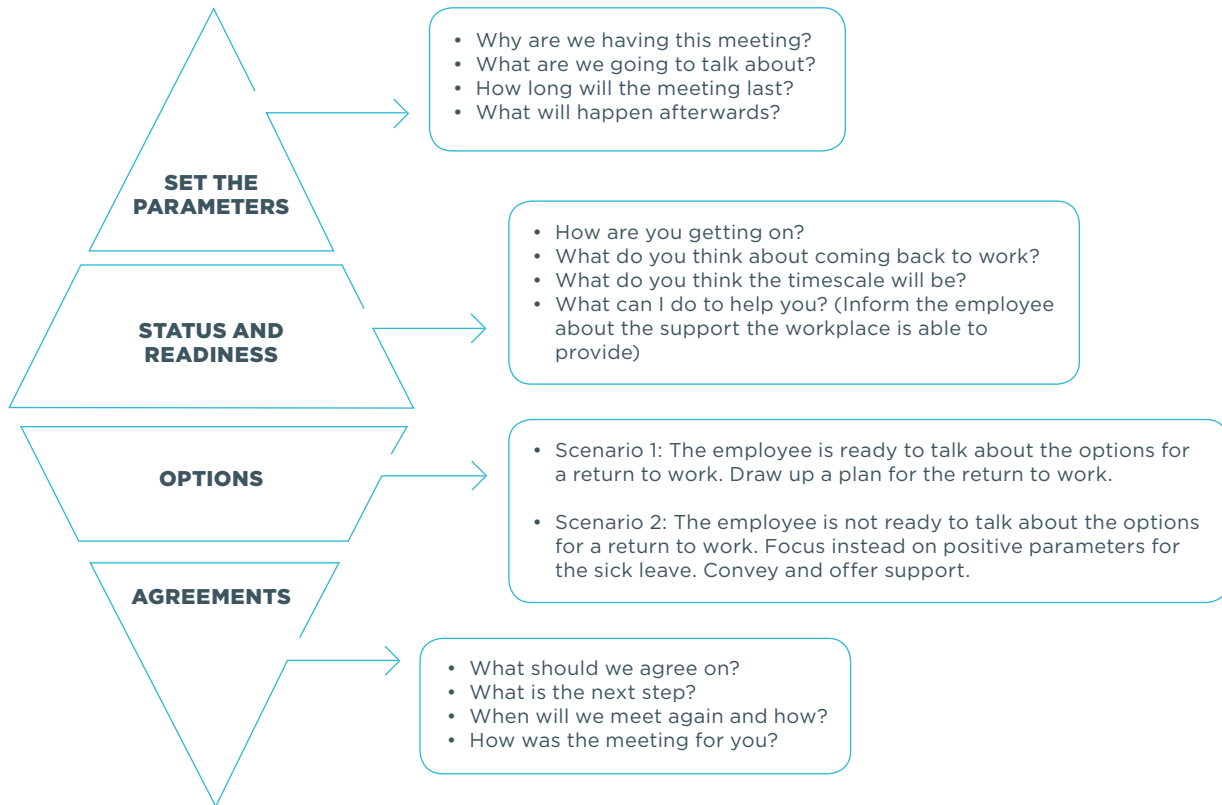
PREPARE

Before the interview you should prepare yourself:

- ▶ Send an e-mail to the employee, briefly outlining the issues that you will be talking about at the meeting. Tell them that they are entitled to be accompanied by a third party, e.g. a union representative.
- ▶ You may also wish to speak to the HR department or a management colleague about positive experiences and ask for advice.
- ▶ Consider your own understanding of the employee and the situation: What is your position? How was your relationship with the employee before the sick leave? Are you sympathetic to the fact that the employee is on sick leave? Or do you find it difficult to understand and accept? It is important that you assess your feelings about the employee and the situation, so that you are able to listen and act professionally.

STRUCTURING THE SICK-LEAVE INTERVIEW

The following may serve as a source of inspiration for the interview.





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 can talk.

When the employee is ready for a gradual return to work, draw up a personalised plan together. A return-to-work plan is a dynamic document in which you and the employee both write, revise and add items.

You must reach agreement on at least the following points:

- 1. Working time
- 2. Work tasks
- 3. Relationships

WORKING TIME

Bear the following rules of thumb in mind when planning the hours to be worked at first:

- Plan a slow but gradual increase in hours from week to week. Be aware that the number of hours may need to be adjusted along the way.
- The meeting should not be held before 09:00.
- Are there particular times of day when the employee feels better?

We recommend that you draw up a timetable that specifies the number of hours and how they are distributed on a week-to-week basis. This form was inspired by the Clinic for Occupational Medicine at Aalborg University Hospital.

WEEK	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	TOTAL HOURS
1-2	2	R	2	R	2	6
3-4	2	R	3	R	3	8
5-6	3	4	R	4	3	14
7-8	4	5	3	5	4	21
9	5	6	5	6	5	27
10	6	6	6	6	6	30
11	6	7	6	7	7	33
12	7	7	7	7	7	35
13	7.5	7.5	7.5	7.5	7	37

WORK TASKS

For many people on sick leave, life is one big mess of difficult and confusing demands. Together, you and the employee need to draw up a systematic overview of the work that they feel capable of doing when they first return to work. The Clinic for Occupational Medicine at Aalborg University Hospital has devised a simple method that you and the employee can use to generate an overview of the duties with which they are and are not comfortable.

The method consists of you helping the employee to sort what they do into the categories green, yellow and red:

GREEN TASKS

refers to things that the employee feels capable of doing right away, and which are relatively easy to pick up and drop again.

YELLOW TASKS

refers to things that the employee expects to be able to cope with in 1-2 months.

RED TASKS

refers to things that will only be feasible in the long term, i.e. only just before or after full resumption of work.

It is also worthwhile looking around the department to see if there are any green tasks the employee could do that are not normally part of their job.

Some people on sick leave want to start with the red and yellow categories, because these are closest to the type of work they like and identify with. It is important to remind them that they are only being asked to perform less complex tasks in the short term, and that they will eventually return to their previous duties.

WHEN WILL THE TIME BE RIGHT TO RETURN TO WORK?

People on sick leave often find it difficult to assess when they will be ready to return to work. Most people will still have some symptoms of stress and reduced working capacity for a period after they return. It may provide them with a sense of security and peace of mind to know that you understand, and that returning to work is a process that takes time.



RELATIONSHIPS

Disputes and problems working with others may have contributed to the employee's stress. If so, it is important that when they first return, they work with people with whom they are comfortable and work well.

Ask the employee:

- ▶ Is there anyone with whom you work particularly well?
- ▶ Are there any clients or citizens who will be more or less of a problem to work with at first?

INFORMATION

The agreements that you and the employee enter into often have implications for other staff in your department, the organisation and external partners. Try, along with the employee, to generate an overview of who may be affected by the agreements you have made.

If the employee has been off work for a long time, you must also bear in mind what you need to tell them about any relevant changes or new developments in the workplace.

FOLLOW-UP

Even the most well-planned return may turn out not to work in practice.

When somebody returns to work, there is a risk of them signing off sick again. This can happen if their working hours and duties increase too quickly or if the manager does not hold follow-up meetings. During the first 5–6 weeks, you should hold a weekly follow-up meeting with the employee. After that, you may discuss changing it to every two weeks. Even a couple of months after the return to work, you should continue to pay extra attention to the well-being of the employee concerned.

STRUCTURE OF FOLLOW-UP MEETINGS:

- ▶ How are things?
- ▶ How has the employee responded to the number of hours, the work and relationships involved?
- ▶ Should you change the plan for the next stage?
- ▶ Does the categorisation into red, yellow and green need to change?
- ▶ Is there more – or something else – you could be doing to support the employee?
- ▶ Are there tasks that the employee can do more or less of in the coming week?
- ▶ Is there anyone who should be informed of the decisions made at this meeting?

A good follow-up meeting should take no more than 20–30 minutes.

When somebody in your department is off sick or on a return-to-work plan, it affects everybody. Other staff may need to work faster or do things they are not used to. They may resent the extra workload and feel annoyed with the employee who is receiving special consideration.

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:

- ▶ making clear that you are aware of and happy that the team is putting in extra effort
- ▶ informing the team of the agreement between you and their stressed colleague
- ▶ prioritising work in the department and team. What do you have to achieve? What is impossible to achieve while an employee has reduced working capacity?
- ▶ making sure that the employee's core duties do not end up being neglected, and that the others can get on with their work
- ▶ finding out if temporary cover is an option
- ▶ addressing any potential negative dynamics in the team.

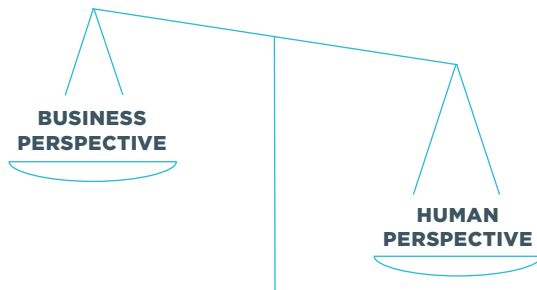
Align your decisions regarding reprioritisation with those of your boss.

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. IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU AND YOUR TEAM MAKE THE EFFORT TO PROVIDE A LITTLE EXTRA SUPPORT.

TAKE DIFFERENT THINGS INTO ACCOUNT AT DIFFERENT TIMES

When an employee is off sick or in the process of returning to work, you must balance two main perspectives: the business perspective and the human perspective.



At the start of a period of sick leave, it is good to emphasise the human perspective, but over time this may become difficult to maintain.

If the employee does not come back, or is incapable of increasing their working hours and duties, it may at some point be difficult to justify this to senior management, HR and the rest of the staff.

The level of patience with an employee depends on a number of factors:

- ▶ Organisational factors: e.g. policies on stress and sick leave, general staff policy, corporate culture, temporary cover, the financial situation, trade union representation, etc.
- ▶ Management factors: e.g. the manager's experience, values, options, relationship with the stressed employee, knowledge, etc.
- ▶ Team factors: e.g. the range of tasks, the level of pressure, whether others will be able to take up the work, etc.
- ▶ Individual factors: e.g. the employee's status and seniority, the history behind the sick leave, personal circumstances, interest and willingness to work toward a solution, etc.

It is important that you are aware of the various factors when making a decision on retention or – in rare cases – dismissal. This will make your decision more informed and easier to justify.

WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Employees on long-term sick leave are usually in contact with professionals in the health and social systems. The whole process runs more smoothly if you are able to make use of relevant resources in these systems. There is a distinction between internal and external sources of information, support and advice.

INTERNAL RESOURCES

- ▶ If there is a HR department at your workplace, they often have experience of the return-to-work process. Meet them, ask for help and use them as a sounding board.
- ▶ **Your boss:** Ask your boss for advice and use senior management as a sounding board.
- ▶ **Your management colleagues:** Many managers have experience of stressed employees on sick leave and have valuable experience to share. Talk to them.

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

GPs

The individual on sick leave will usually be in close contact with their family doctor. Many doctors have considerable experience of collaborating with workplaces on getting patients back to work. GPs can also help draw up a 'fit-to-work certificate'.

FIT-TO-WORK CERTIFICATES

A fit-to-work certificate is a good option if you lack inspiration and confidence in planning the return, or if you encounter difficulty in getting the plan to work. Fit-to-work certificates are drawn up by you, the employee and their family doctor.

The employer pays for the certificate. You can read more about fit-to-work certificates and download examples at www.star.dk.

PSYCHOLOGIST

If the employee is seeing a psychologist, you can invite them both to a meeting. Psychologists are often accustomed to attending meetings in the workplace and helping to tailor the return process. You must, of course, have the employee's permission to speak to their psychologist.

THE LOCAL AUTHORITY

Local authority caseworkers are often able to help put together a good retention plan. Financial support may also be available, which reduces the financial burden on your department and may encourage the workplace to be more patient. Some 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.

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

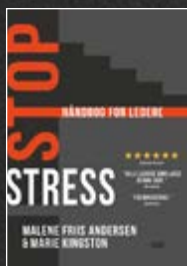
THIS PAMPHLET IS FOR

managers who want to be better at helping stressed staff return to work.

IT PROVIDES INSPIRATION AND TOOLS THAT WILL HELP YOU TO

- ▶ understand stress and respond accordingly, depending on how seriously your employees are affected
- ▶ get an overview of what to look out for when helping a stressed employee back to work
- ▶ conduct interviews with an employee on sick leave
- ▶ plan the return to work, specifically in relation to working hours, duties and co-operation
- ▶ 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.

LEDERNE

Vermlandsgade 65
2300 København S
Tlf 3283 3283

www.lederne.dk

LEDERNE 
bringer dig videre