



Management Guide

# HOW TO PREVENT AND MANAGE YOUR OWN STRESS AS A MANAGER



A man with light brown hair and a beard, wearing a dark blue V-neck sweater, is pointing his right index finger towards a whiteboard. He is holding a glass of orange juice in his left hand. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# **STRESS AMONG MANAGERS**

**Despite focusing more closely on the problem in recent years, we have still not succeeded in reducing the number of employees and managers suffering from stress. A survey of the Danish Association of Managers and Executives in April 2015 showed that 18% of members (currently in jobs) often or constantly feel stressed. The evidence suggests that being a manager entails a risk of overload and stress. Yet stress among managers is often considered a taboo subject.**

**In this pamphlet, we focus on how to prevent and manage your own stress as a manager. We hope that it will help you break the taboo and create the best possible conditions for good management and preventing stress.**

## WHAT IS STRESS?

There is no consensus on the definition of stress, and no official diagnosis. What one person sees as stress, another sees as just being busy.

This pamphlet uses the following definition:

- ▶ Stress occurs when you feel that you cannot live up to the demands placed on you over 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.

### STRESS AND BEING BUSY ARE NOT THE SAME

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. This is one reason why many managers ignore stress symptoms and see them a natural part of the job – 'I'm just busy, not stressed'.

## WHY SHOULD MANAGERS DO SOMETHING ABOUT THEIR OWN STRESS?

A stressed manager is not the best manager. Stress has a profound effect on your ability to be a good manager, which can have unfortunate consequences for the employees' productivity, motivation and stress levels.

## WAYS IN WHICH YOUR STRESS AFFECTS EMPLOYEES:

### 1. YOU RISK PASSING ON YOUR STRESS

You are a role model, so there is a risk of passing on your stress to your employees. The primary model for their behaviour in the workplace is your general state of mind and attitudes. Your stress can spread like ripples on a pond, because your employees – perhaps subconsciously – will copy you.

### 2. STRESSED MANAGERS MAKE POORER DECISIONS

Stress reduces your mental capacity and ability to make rational decisions. You run the risk of leading your employees in the wrong direction, making poor decisions or prioritising badly, all of which will have major consequences on your chances of reaching your targets.

### 3. STRESSED MANAGERS FIND IT DIFFICULT TO MOTIVATE THEIR STAFF

Stress affects empathy and social skills. Stressed managers find it difficult to understand and accept their employees. They also find it difficult to generate a motivating and inspirational working environment. This may impact on your productivity and well-being, as well as your ability to retain good employees.

# WHY ARE MANAGERS AT RISK OF CONTRACTING STRESS?

Being a manager can be exciting and frustrating, stimulating and challenging. The job is interesting, involves plenty of affirmation and motivation, and gives you the opportunity to develop yourself and your skills. Being a manager involves many positive emotions and you may find it hard to let go of the work.

## **THE INFINITE NATURE OF MANAGEMENT**

The main task of the manager is to achieve results through and with others. There is no checklist for this. You can always do a little better and a little more. There is always room to communicate better, offer extra motivation for employees or further optimise processes. This is the infinite nature of management. The potential source of stress is that you do not know when you have done the job well enough.

E-mail and mobile phones also make it possible to work outside of normal working hours – in fact, it may even be expected of you. It may seem like a constant source of stress that you do not know when you can take time off with a clear conscience.

Stress is a risk because the job of manager is deeply meaningful, infinite and complex, and because there is no checklist.

## **THE ROLE OF MANAGER CAN BE COMPLEX AND FULL OF DILEMMAS**

Many managers find that their jobs are becoming increasingly complex, due to changing market conditions, technological progress or organisational factors.

This complexity may seem like one big, constantly changing mess. It can be difficult to learn enough about a problem before you have to make a decision on it. Every choice you face may have an overwhelming number of different consequences.



Managers often find themselves facing dilemmas that involve several conflicting interests, with no single, unique solution. The risk is that you get stuck in these dilemmas and spend too much energy trying to figure them out. However, the lack of a

definitive or clear solution is inherent to the concept of a dilemma. If you choose to do one thing, it will have negative consequences for something else.

**PERFORMANCE IS A TYPICAL MANAGEMENT DILEMMA  
WITH NO SINGLE, UNIQUE SOLUTION:**

**THE PERFORMANCE DILEMMA**

What demands can I place on my team, and how much importance should I place on their experience of strain?

If I take a hard line and insist on ambitious performance management, I may achieve better results, but I also run the risk of causing stress in the team.

If I instead prioritise empathy, and acknowledge the strain they are under, I may improve our relationship, but I also run the risk of us not reaching the targets in our performance contract and fostering a 'culture of moaning'.

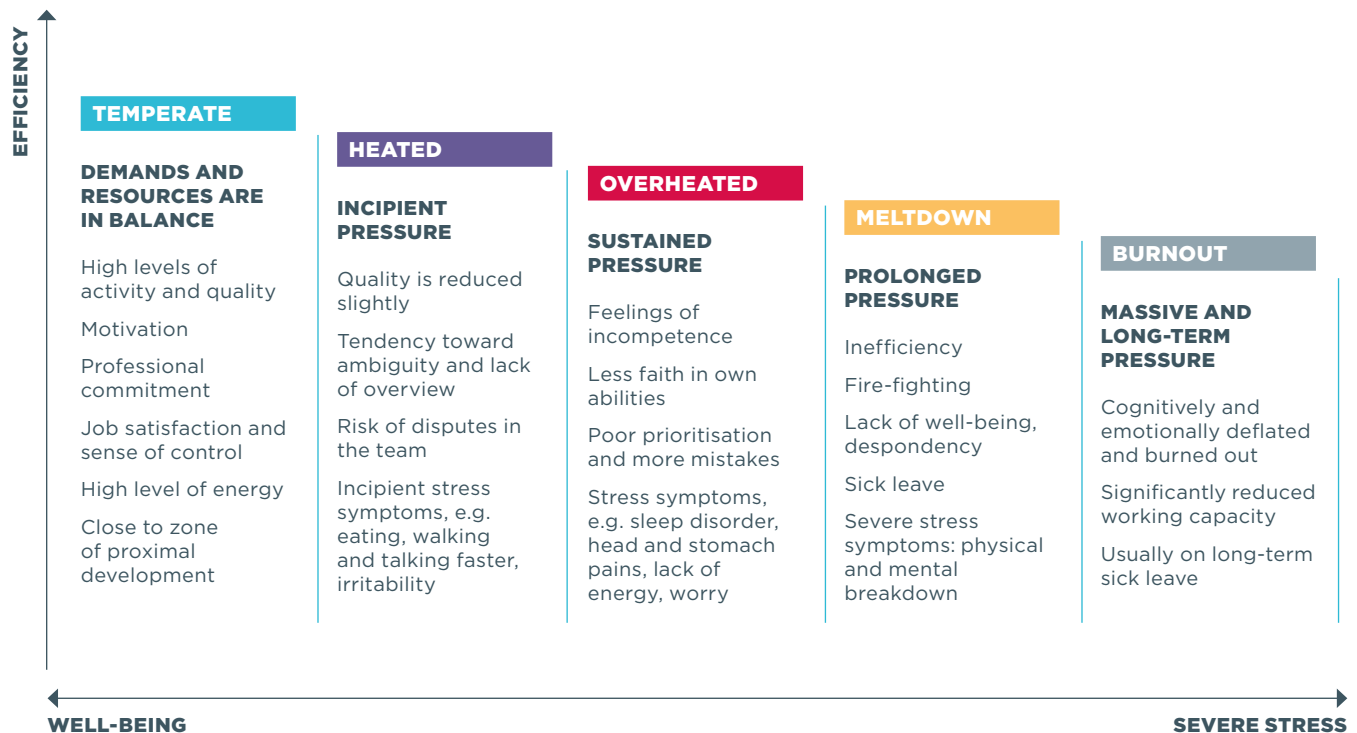
WHERE IN PARTICULAR  
DO YOU ENCOUNTER  
COMPLEXITY OR DILEMMAS  
IN YOUR JOB?

## THE STEPS OF STRESS – FROM WELL-BEING AND PRODUCTIVITY TO STRESS AND REDUCED WORKING CAPACITY

Stress is not a singular, well-defined term. It is used to describe a range of conditions with different degrees of strain. Both long-term sick leave and the short-term nervousness you feel as you approach an important deadline can be described as stress. But they are quite different.

When we talk about stress, we are talking about a process in which high levels of well-being and productivity are affected by gradually increasing strain. As the load increases, we descend the Steps of Stress, the symptoms become more severe, and our working capacity and level of well-being fall. When you are very stressed, your ability to do your job well is considerably diminished.

There are five Steps of Stress, each of which is characterised by a number of symptoms and types of behaviour.





HOW FAR DOWN THE  
STEPS OF STRESS HAVE  
YOUR EMPLOYEES OR  
COLLEAGUES BEEN?

HOW FAR HAVE  
YOU BEEN?

**PLEASE NOTE:**

Severe stress is something that often develops gradually, so please remember to pay attention to minor changes in yourself. Do not accept these changes as a necessary part of your job as a manager. Respect the signals your body sends you and act in plenty of time. It is not unusual for managers to wait too long to acknowledge the problem and seek help. But the further down the steps you go, the harder it is to get on track and return to the temperate phase, where you are able to be a good manager again.

# **PREVENT YOUR OWN STRESS - FOUR MAXIMS TO LIVE BY**

The heavy responsibility and infinite nature of management entail a risk of overload and stress. But there is a great deal you can do to prevent it. Prevention is about establishing and following rules that will help you create balance and perspective. These four maxims will not only prevent stress, but also make you a better and more efficient manager.



## MAXIM 1

### CREATE TIME FOR SELF-MANAGEMENT – AND PRIORITISE IT

As a manager, both your responsibilities and the volume of your work may seem endless and confusing. You seldom reach the bottom of your to-do list or empty your inbox – and even if you do, new tasks will have popped up in the meantime. A manager's job is rarely done. You can always communicate a bit more, further optimise processes and do extra follow-up work on targets – not to mention the ongoing skills enhancement of your staff. In this perpetual stream of responsibilities and tasks, it is important that you keep track of things and spend your time and energy on the most important ones.

#### What, specifically, can you do?

- ▶ Set aside time each week for self-management – make a recurring appointment in your diary.
- ▶ Use this time to create an overview of your tasks and prioritise them.
- ▶ Get an overview of the near future – are there important outstanding issues or particular areas you ought to prioritise?
- ▶ Get an overview of your employees – is everybody on the right track and thriving? Is there important information you need to provide?
- ▶ Keep track of when you will next talk to your boss – and about what.

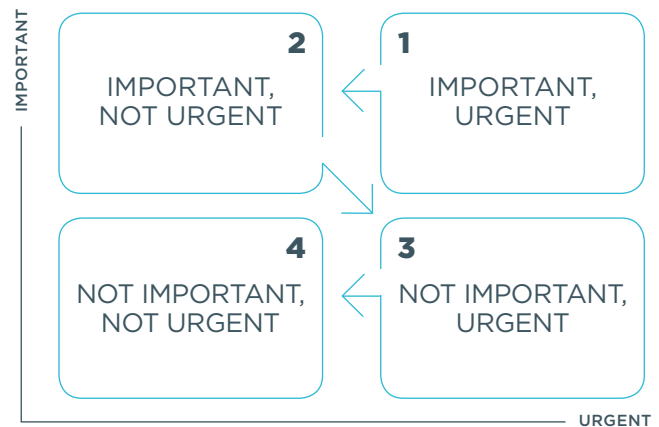
The ability to prioritise is an important part of being a manager, as your responsibilities rarely fit easily into the time available. You must choose your priorities carefully.

The Prioritisation Matrix is a good tool for this.

Start in field 1 with tasks that are especially important for you as a manager, and which are also urgent. Then you move on to fields 2, 3 and 4.

The matrix helps managers to acquire an overview, prioritise what is important and avoid focusing on tasks that do not add value.

#### THE PRIORITISATION MATRIX



Modelled on Covey

It is always a good idea to discuss your priorities with your own boss – whether you are in doubt about them or not.



## MAXIM 2

### NAVIGATE THE COMPLEXITY

Complexity is an unavoidable part of your job as a manager.

#### **But you can learn to navigate it:**

- ▶ Accept that there is a lot you do not know and will never fully understand in every detail. Avoid being sucked into endless information searches and paralysis when you have to make decisions. Instead, trust your best up-to-date knowledge.
- ▶ Keep your eye on your core mission and your goals as a manager.
- ▶ Accept that you may well no longer be the team's specialist in a particular field, and stop trying to keep up with all the latest developments.
- ▶ Focus instead on your key stakeholders and customers.

## MAXIM 3

### CREATE BALANCE AMONG THE DILEMMAS AND MAKE REALISTIC DEMANDS ON YOURSELF

In a sense, management dilemmas are one of the clearest examples of the complexity that managers need to navigate and cope with. Here, we are really talking about 'mess' that cannot just be cleaned up and taken care of, but which you are stuck with because of your responsibilities as a manager. Dilemmas are one of the most common sources of overheating and stress symptoms among managers.

#### **The following are some tips on how to handle dilemmas:**

- ▶ Use management colleagues, your own line manager, HR or other sounding boards to discuss and identify the dilemma. It can be a great relief to find that you are not alone, and that others face management dilemmas too.
- ▶ Make realistic demands on yourself – do not expect to be able to solve the unsolvable. Focus on approaching dilemmas in a way that best balances and integrates the various interests at play.
- ▶ You should also accept that the way you cope with the dilemma will perhaps please some more than others. It can be a relief to realise that you cannot please everyone – indeed, pleasing everyone is not your core task.



#### MAXIM 4

## RECOGNISE AND RESPOND TO YOUR STRESS SYMPTOMS

Good and productive managers take care of themselves. Your energy and time are not unlimited resources. You are not superhuman. You must develop an awareness of your own stress symptoms and react in good time. Once you know how your stress typically manifests itself, you will be much more aware of it and act in time before you develop severe stress.

### **To increase awareness of your own stress symptoms, try the following:**

- ▶ Write a logbook of your working life – duties, projects, challenges, considerations, etc. When you look back at it, you will often be able to discern patterns in the severity of the workload and your reactions, and improve your self-insight.
- ▶ Take your own temperature about once a week. Ask yourself:
  - How have I felt over the last week?
  - How was my mood?
  - How have I felt physically?
  - Have I felt both energetic and relaxed in the last week?
- ▶ Take the Stress Test on [www.lederne.dk](http://www.lederne.dk) – and get an idea of your own stress level.
- ▶ Reflect on the following questions:
  - How can I tell that I am stressed?
  - What happens to me when I am under time pressure?
  - What happens to me when I juggle difficult management tasks or dilemmas?
  - What happens to me when I am unable to deliver what is expected of me?
  - What is the worst pressure that I have been under? How did I react to it?
- ▶ On a good day – when you are not feeling under pressure – ask your boss, colleagues, staff or partner:
  - How do you know when I am stressed (if you do know)?
  - What do I do? What do I say?
- ▶ Also pay attention to where, when and how you recharge your batteries.

# **HOW STRESS MANIFESTS ITSELF IN MANAGERS**

When a manager develops stress, it is not that different to when it happens to a member of staff. Some of the symptoms and signs are the same. But often the symptoms are ignored, as they are considered an unavoidable part of the job, and it is hard to know where to turn for help. This is why managers often wait longer before reaching out.

Some stress symptoms have a particularly adverse effect on your ability to exercise good judgement. It is therefore particularly important that you acknowledge them in good time and seek help from your boss, colleagues, HR, etc.

Pay particular attention to the following symptoms of stress, which are both common among managers and particularly problematic for your ability to do the job. Maybe you recognise some of them?

## SLEEP PROBLEMS

- **Difficulty falling asleep**
- **Sleeping restlessly and lightly**
- **Waking during the night and early in the morning**
- **Feeling fatigued.**

Many managers experience sleep problems during periods of their working lives, often because of their heavy workload and worries. Sleep problems are often self-perpetuating, as you may work long and late to avoid falling behind. This affects your sleep – you wake in the night with a head full of worries, unable to fall asleep again. You turn up for work tired and raw, and cannot perform at your best. This gives rise to even more worries. When you suffer from sleep problems, it is difficult to be a capable and attentive manager, as it has a significant effect on your thinking, emotions and body.

## RUMINATION

- **Excessive worry**
- **Catastrophising**
- **Inability to let negative thoughts go.**

It is natural, as a manager, to spend a lot of time thinking about your job and speculating about challenges and opportunities. But if those thoughts become increasingly negative and you are unable to let them go, it can become distressing. You may find that the negative thoughts just go round and round in circles. It is hard to think clearly and make wise decisions when you are worried about losing your job. It is hard to be attentive to your employees,

stay optimistic and have faith in the future. The negative thoughts are not only distressing, but also impair your judgement and attentiveness.

## ATTENTION DEFICIT

- **Inability to concentrate**
- **Memory problems**
- **Difficulty maintaining an overview and making decisions.**

Stress affects our cognitive abilities and can have major consequences for managers. It is difficult to be a good manager if you have trouble remembering and making decisions. As a manager, your cognitive abilities are affected by the fast pace of your work and the large volume of information to which you are exposed. These problems are only exacerbated by a lack of breaks and long working hours. Managers need to stay organised and think clearly.

## CHANGES IN SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

- **Irritability and impatience**
- **Anger and aggressive behaviour**
- **Withdrawal from social contexts and contact.**

Management is often a matter of direct communication with your staff – as such, it is unfortunate if your behaviour changes when under stress. It is difficult to manage if you keep your distance from them or convey irritation and impatience. They will then expend energy trying to decipher your signals and may grow wary of you. They may choose not to share important issues with you because they fear how you will react.





# HOW DO YOU COPE WITH STRESS?

The four maxims presented earlier can help you prevent stress. They are particularly useful when you are under the greatest pressure. If you are already showing symptoms of stress, you will need help to regain your balance and manage it.

First of all, you should talk to someone about it – for example, your boss. Social support helps to repair stress. Your line manager has responsibility for and an interest in ensuring that you are not stressed. The remaining pages of this pamphlet offer advice on who to talk to and how to contact them.

If you notice any of the typical stress signs for managers, here are suggestions for counteracting them.

## **COUNTERACTING SLEEP PROBLEMS**

To counteract sleep problems, help yourself and your body to wind down at night and create the best conditions for your body to rest.

- ▶ Avoid computers, TV, smartphones and tablets for a couple of hours before bedtime
- ▶ Stick to a regular bedtime
- ▶ Engage in light physical activity in the evening, e.g. go for a walk
- ▶ Avoid alcohol and coffee in the evening – and cut down in general
- ▶ Stop thinking that you MUST sleep. That can keep you awake. Instead, say to yourself: 'I'll offer my body a chance to rest, and maybe I'll fall asleep'
- ▶ If necessary, use an app with sleep meditations or soothing sounds.



### **COUNTERACTING ATTENTION DEFICIT**

If you develop attention deficit problems, it is because you are mentally overloaded. There is just too much in your inbox, and you risk driving in too high a gear as you try to deal with it. To get more peace, try the following:

- ▶ Set aside 'slow and long' thinking time in your diary – and stick to it
- ▶ Create visual calm in your workplace, so it seems more manageable
- ▶ Prioritise peace and quiet, both at work and at home, to regain your strength
- ▶ Take breaks with others and talk about something other than work
- ▶ If you have a sedentary job, hold walk-and-talk meetings or breaks where you get some exercise. If you have a physically active job, sit down during your breaks. The act of switching activity helps the mind to rest.
- ▶ Eat and drink healthily.

### **COUNTERACTING RUMINATION**

Rumination can be both painful and energy-sapping for managers, because there are no solutions – the mind dwells on negative thoughts and self-blame.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to make rumination and negative thoughts disappear completely, but there are some things you can do:

- ▶ Write down your negative thoughts and worries and examine how realistic they are
- ▶ Do something physical, such as walking or stretching. Pay attention to your body and how it feels.
- ▶ Take care of yourself – do something that makes you feel good
- ▶ Do something that brings you closer to the manager you want to be
- ▶ If you have persistent problems with rumination and negative thoughts, ask a psychologist for help.

### **COUNTERACTING IRRITATION AND IMPATIENCE WITH OTHERS**

When a stressed manager becomes irritable, impatient, angry or withdraws from social contact, it is a problem not only for you, but also for your staff.

You must make a special effort to develop self-awareness and regain self-control, so you can be a better and more motivational manager.

- ▶ Pay attention to your moods and how you affect your surroundings. Before leaving home in the morning, ask yourself how you feel today and what you might be taking with you to work if you are not careful.
- ▶ Regularly ask yourself if you spend too much or too little time with your team. Does this have something to do with how you feel? If so, should you make changes?
- ▶ When you find yourself in a particularly stressful situation at work, practise shifting gear before you react in an inappropriate fashion. Imagine that you have three gears, and can shift between them if necessary:

### **FIRST GEAR**

BE AWARE OF YOUR BREATHING AND YOUR BODY. WHAT DO YOU FEEL?

If that does not work, shift into second gear

### **SECOND GEAR**

COUNT TO 10, BREATHING DEEPLY INTO THE PIT OF YOUR STOMACH. LET SOME OF THE TENSION GO AS YOU EXHALE.

If that does not work, shift into third gear.

### **THIRD GEAR**

ASK FOR A BREAK AND REMOVE YOURSELF FROM THE SITUATION, E.G. GO TO THE BATHROOM. FOLLOW UP ON THE SITUATION ONCE YOU HAVE CALMED DOWN.

# WHO CAN HELP?

When managers develop stress symptoms, it is not just a private matter. Stress arises in the interaction between you, your role and your workplace. It is not solely your responsibility.

Help and support are available at work and elsewhere.

## AT WORK

### SENIOR MANAGEMENT

Your boss bears some of the responsibility for getting you back on track. It is also in your line manager's interest to help prevent and manage your stress. Your workplace is best served by you feeling well and you being productive.

- ▶ Discuss your core job with your boss and ask for help in prioritising your duties. What are the most important things you need to get done? What is less important?
- ▶ Align expectations about working hours, including availability via phone and e-mail outside working hours.
- ▶ Tell your boss how you feel, and what in particular is causing problems for you in the job. Your boss may even have personal experience of stress on which you can draw.

### YOUR MANAGEMENT COLLEAGUES

Most managers have some experience of stress, but it is not something often discussed between them. In fact, it is sometimes considered taboo and shameful. However, peer support has a preventive effect.

- ▶ Tell your colleagues how you feel, and what in particular is causing problems for you in the job. It can be a relief to talk to others about how you feel.
- ▶ Ask your colleagues about their experiences of stress in the job. What did they do to prevent it?
- ▶ If stress turns out to be a general problem within the management team, maybe you should discuss it with senior management.

### HUMAN RESOURCES

If your workplace has a human resources department, it almost certainly has experience of managing and preventing stress in the organisation – perhaps specifically among managers.

- ▶ The HR officer may act as confidential sounding board, listen to you and offer good advice.
- ▶ They can also give you information about the workplace's policies regarding working hours, strain and stress.
- ▶ They may even recall what other managers have done in similar situations.



## OUTSIDE THE WORKPLACE

### DANISH ASSOCIATION OF MANAGERS AND EXECUTIVES

Help and advice are available to members of the Danish Association of Managers and Executives, including tips on self-help, on our website:

**[www.lederne.dk](http://www.lederne.dk)**

We also offer well-being counselling and can act as a sounding board if you need help with a specific problem here and now. **See more at [www.lederne.dk](http://www.lederne.dk).**

### YOUR PARTNER

If you are suffering from stress, it is always a good idea to talk to your partner about it. You may think that there is no need, as he or she knows what you are thinking. But stress is often misinterpreted by partners as anger, aloofness or sadness, and can have an adverse impact on the relationship. That's the last thing you need when you are already stressed.

- ▶ Talk to your partner about what is causing you stress at work, and how long it has been going on for. Talk to them about the prospects of change.
- ▶ Tell your partner about how the stress is affecting you and the symptoms you are dealing with.

- ▶ Ask your partner for help, in the form of:
  - A little more understanding and fewer commitments at home
  - Physical care and proximity help, too – caressing reduces stress
  - Remember – take breaks, reduce the workload and practise the four maxims.

### SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

Many managers seek help from psychologists who specialise in management and stress – in other words, help that is directly specific to the job.

- ▶ The psychologist will talk to you in complete confidence, so you can be absolutely honest about your situation.
- ▶ You will learn proven methods that other managers have used to cope with their stress.
- ▶ The focus will be on you and how to make progress.

When choosing a psychologist, it is important that you find one that has the necessary experience, but who also inspires confidence.

## THIS PAMPHLET IS FOR

managers who want to know how to prevent and manage their stress.

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### IT PROVIDES INSPIRATION AND TOOLS THAT WILL HELP YOU TO

- ▶ understand stress – from well-being to sick leave
  - ▶ realise why it is important to do something about your own stress
  - ▶ take action to prevent stress and maintain your well-being
  - ▶ recognise how stress manifests itself
  - ▶ actively manage stress and get back on track
  - ▶ seek help from others – both within the organisation and outside it.
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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](mailto:bestillinger@klim.dk) and enter 'Lederne' in the subject field.

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