




Management Guide

HOW TO PREVENT STAFF STRESS



LEDERNE 
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The background image shows two men in a modern office environment. One man, in the foreground, is looking out a large window, his hands clasped. The other man, in the background, is holding a smartphone and looking towards the first man. The scene is dimly lit, with light coming from the window.

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. This pamphlet provides knowledge and tools to prevent stress in your employees. Managers play a pivotal role in preventing and reducing stress.

WHAT IS STRESS?

- ▶ 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.

Although stress is a widespread phenomenon, there is no universally accepted definition or an official diagnosis. This means that we have to be extremely clear what we are talking about when we use the word stress.

HOW IS STRESS UNDERSTOOD IN YOUR WORKPLACE?

- ▶ Do you talk about stress a lot or a little?
- ▶ Is being busy confused with stress?
- ▶ Is stress confused with being busy?

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. Some employees enjoy working at a high tempo all the time, others do not.

WHAT TRIGGERS STRESS?

Lack of influence, lack of support, high demands, a sense of injustice, unpredictability and time pressures increase the risk of stress. In many workplaces, constant changes and optimisation pile pressure on employees, and the pace of work is often quite fast.

Many people also deploy personal 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, with work often an important source of personal satisfaction. People often take stress as a personal defeat and find it difficult to do their job properly. But they also find it difficult to let go, because the work is fascinating and motivating.

Stress is not a simple phenomenon and exclusively the fault of the workplace or the employee. Rather, it is triggered by a complex interaction between the employee, their various roles, the workplace, the management and society at large.

LOW LEVELS OF WELL-BEING REDUCE WORKING CAPACITY AND PRODUCTIVITY BY UP TO 25%

WHY PREVENT STRESS AMONG YOUR STAFF?

As a manager, you have a huge interest in preventing stress. For one thing, it costs money – sick leave is expensive in both financial and personal terms. The period prior to sick leave can also be characterised by reduced productivity and lack of well-being. Stress leads to memory and concentration problems, among other things, and even minor symptoms reduce working capacity. On the other hand, stress-prevention measures have a significant positive impact on both productivity and well-being. In other words, focusing on stress prevention makes it easier to build a good and efficient workplace in which goals are reached.

AN ESSENTIAL MANAGEMENT TASK

- ▶ **95%** of all managers see dealing with staff stress as part of their job
- ▶ **70%** of all managers have held a stress interview with an employee in the past three years

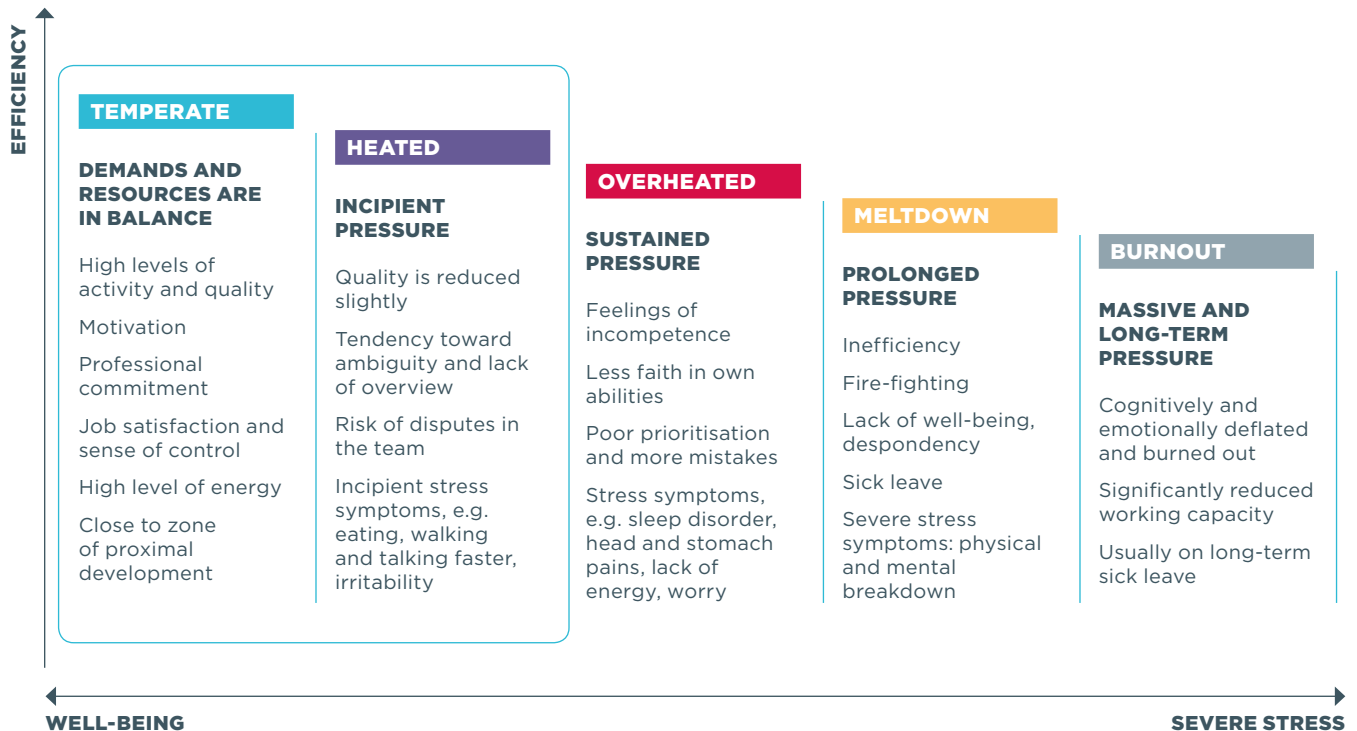
(Source: Danish Association of Managers and Executives, 2015)



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 prevent stress among your employees, and keep them in the temperate phase, where productivity and well-being are at their highest. You will also learn how to help guide them back to the temperate phase.





THE TEMPERATE PHASE

Employees in the temperate phase enjoy the best-possible balance between demands and resources. Levels of productivity and well-being are high.

DEMANDS AND RESOURCES BALANCE



Employees who feel that requirements and resources are in balance feel able to do their job in a professional and satisfactory manner. They have the knowledge, ability and time needed to perform well in their role.

This is why you, as a manager, have a special interest in your employees being in the temperate phase. As a rule, well-being and motivation are at their highest in the temperate phase, as are productivity and quality.

WHY ARE WELL-BEING AND MOTIVATION HIGHEST IN THE TEMPERATE PHASE? BECAUSE THE EMPLOYEE FEELS THAT THEY ARE:

- ▶ in control – able to prioritise work and choose tasks
- ▶ competent – able to perform their duties well
- ▶ developing – they have the energy to learn and improve

All three factors are strong motivators, and generate both well-being and productivity. In the temperate phase, employees have surplus mental energy, and find it easier to acquire new skills and learn new things.

HOW TO MAINTAIN THE TEMPERATE PHASE AND PREVENT STRESS

As a manager, it is in your interest to keep your employees in the temperate phase. This is where they are at their most motivated and productive, and thrive in their jobs. Fortunately, there is a lot you can do to create the best conditions for a temperate workplace. In fact, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that direct, daily personnel management plays the most important role in creating a temperate workplace.

CONSCIOUSLY WORK ON THE SIX KEY FACTORS IN YOUR MANAGEMENT

The National Research Centre for the Working Environment (NRCWE) stresses six key factors. When all six are in place, they have a positive effect on the psychological working environment, but they are also important for productivity and well-being.

THE SIX KEY FACTORS

1. INFLUENCE

I am able to exert influence on important decisions and my terms and conditions

4. REWARD

I receive recognition and feedback for my work, and others find my input valuable

2. SOCIAL SUPPORT

I have good relationships with my colleagues and boss. We are interested in each other and have each other's backs

5. PREDICTABILITY

There is a certain predictability in my work, and I am able to exercise some degree of control

3. MEANING

I feel that my work is meaningful and that I make an important difference

6. DEMANDS

The demands placed on me represent a sensible balance between the easy and the challenging

Positive effect of the way in which employees experience the psychological working environment.

The relationship between well-being, good performance and lower levels of sick leave

MANAGERS HAVE PLENTY OF OPPORTUNITY TO AFFECT ALL SIX KEY FACTORS:

1. INFLUENCE

Think about decisions in which you might involve the staff. Could they help you develop smarter ways of working? Could they organise their own work? How could you give individual employees the opportunity to influence what they do?

2. SOCIAL SUPPORT

What could you do to forge better relationships with individual employees? To what extent are you part of their day-to-day working life? Could you show more interest in them as individuals? What would enhance team cohesion? Perhaps social activities, teamwork, taking breaks together, etc.?

3. MEANING

Examine what individuals think makes sense and what motivates them in their work – this may vary greatly. Could you delegate more, so that each employee does what is most meaningful for them?

4. REWARD

Be aware of when and how to give feedback and show appreciation to both the team and the individual. Talk to the team about the difference they make and the importance of what they do.

5. PREDICTABILITY

Are your employees in a position to predict and control their work, or do they constantly have to adapt to changes in the work or the organisation? Consider how best to introduce changes and at what speed. Ongoing alignment of expectations about requirements and expectations also aids predictability.

6. DEMANDS

Make demands of the employees, alternating between the easy and moderately difficult, that will optimise both productivity and their personal development. If work is too easy, employees become bored. If it is too difficult, there is a risk of stress.

MANAGEMENT BY EXAMPLE

You have a special responsibility to generate a constructive and motivated atmosphere in your team. Studies have shown that managers play a key role in determining the mood of the team.

Both your direct and indirect communication have an effect. The more aware you are of your mood and your behaviour, the better able you are to communicate in a constructive manner.

Stressed employees often talk about the behaviour of managers being one of the causes of their stress. If you are impatient, too busy and distant, this will have a directly negative impact on your staff. So be aware of the signals you emit!

YOUR WORKING STYLE

What working style do you embody?

- Do you clearly prioritise targets and duties, spend time planning, take breaks, and work in a focused manner during working hours?
- Do you send e-mails outside working hours, constantly go to meetings, forget appointments, skip lunch and fail to respond to e-mails?

YOUR MOOD

Does your mood rub off on your employees?

- Are you constructive, attentive, calm, energetic?
- Are you sad, angry, impatient, critical, remote or very volatile?

YOUR MANAGEMENT

Does your management prevent stress?

- Do you set clear and realistic goals for your employees, and give them feedback and the opportunity to exert influence?
- Do you set goals that are too ambitious and forget to follow up? Are you unjust or remote? Do you let the team take care of itself?

ENCOURAGE MOTIVATION AND SELF-DEVELOPMENT IN YOUR CONVERSATIONS WITH EMPLOYEES

Conversations with employees should be used as a development tool to motivate learning.

Do this more frequently than just annual performance and development reviews and it will help keep employees in the temperate phase. It also makes them more aware of their own abilities and competencies. Use the questions to the right when chatting with employees, both before and after a new or challenging task.

USE THE MANAGEMENT TRIANGLE

Clear goals and feedback prevent stress because they help employees do their jobs well. If they know what is required of them, and when they have done it well, they are better able to concentrate on getting on with their work.

The management triangle is a tool to use in your day-to-day work to ensure that your staff have the best possible conditions to perform well and enjoy a high level of well-being. This is done by communicating goals and expectations, following up on the work and providing feedback. Use the questions as inspiration for how to do this.

COMMUNICATION OF GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS

- What are your expectations of the employee?
- What are the success criteria?
- What is important?
- How do their targets and duties align with those of the team as a whole? And with the strategy?

FEEDBACK

- How did the task go?
- What worked particularly well?
- What should you do differently next time?
- What have you learned for the future?

FOLLOW-UP

- What progress has been made?
- Are there things that are not quite right yet?
- How do the employees intend to handle those?
- What might you suggest?

As you can see, there is plenty of scope for managers to help employees stay in the temperate phase, both through direct intervention and by supporting staff development.

BEFORE

- What competencies are needed to do this kind of work?
- What will be easiest for you? Why?
- What will be most difficult for you? Why?
- What similar work have you done before?
- Are there areas in which you need help? Where is this help available?
- What support do you need?

NEW OR CHALLENGING WORK

AFTER

- How did it go?
- What was the most/least exciting aspect?
- What went particularly well? Why? What did you do?
- Which professional competencies did you use?
- Which social skills did you use?
- What is the most important thing that you learned?



THE HEATED STAGE - WHEN THE FIRST SIGNS OF STRESS APPEAR

The heated phase occurs when an employee feels that pressure has been growing for a while, and that resources and demands are out of balance. Often, they have had to work faster to get everything done. They begin to display a series of minor signals of stress. The heated phase is not dangerous, but obviously it is important to re-establish balance for the sake of the employee's well-being and productivity. A heated employee is not effective or happy. If the heated stage goes on for too long, there is a risk of the employee slipping further down the Steps of Stress and into the overheated phase, where the consequences are more serious.

AN EMPLOYEE MAY BE IN THE HEATED STAGE IF THEY:

- ▶ work faster and seem busy and rushed
- ▶ work overtime and unusual hours
- ▶ stop taking social breaks with colleagues
- ▶ seem excessively preoccupied with work
- ▶ appear remote, impatient or irritable
- ▶ produce work of poorer quality and make more mistakes

DISPUTES IN YOUR TEAM MAY BE A SIGN OF THE HEATED PHASE

Employees in the heated phase are more likely to fall out with colleagues. They are less patient, have less mental energy and are

focused on their own goals. This puts them at greater risk of ending up in disputes with other team members. Remember – disputes are often self-perpetuating and create additional stress.

HOW DO YOU HELP AN EMPLOYEE IN THE HEATED STAGE?

Most employees end up in the heated phase from time to time, e.g. when working on something big and important or during particularly busy periods. This is natural stress and will pass. But if the heated phase continues, you should intervene to help the employee get back on track.

Here are three tips for helping heated employees and preventing more severe forms of stress.

1. TALK!

Have a good chat. Ask them questions such as:

- ▶ How are you getting on?
- ▶ Can you handle the workload?
- ▶ Do some things take up more time than others?
- ▶ Are there tasks you're struggling with?
- ▶ How much work are you doing outside of normal working hours?
- ▶ Is there anything I/we can do to create a better balance?

During the conversation, it is a really good idea to make clear what you expect during working hours. Do employees think you expect more than you actually do?

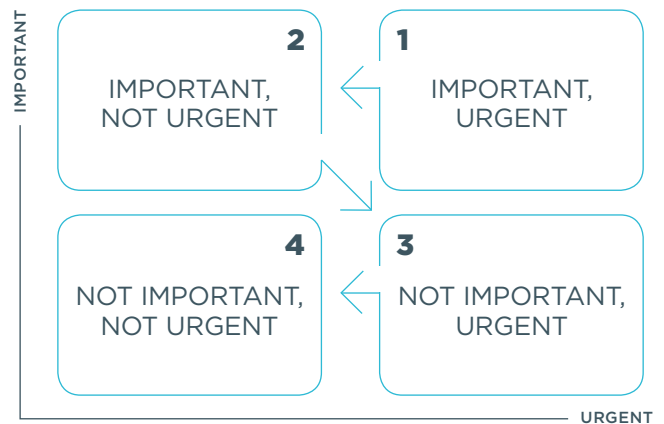
2. PRIORITISE AND PLAN

Heated employees often find it difficult to prioritise their work. Help them with it. When your staff have a better overview of which tasks are important and which are not, it is easier to create a good balance between demands and resources.

Use the Prioritisation Matrix to work on this:

- ▶ Talk to staff about their main roles and the purpose of their jobs. Why does their position exist?
- ▶ Show them the figure below and explain the two axes of the matrix. The closer a task is to the employee's main role, the more important it is. Important tasks are those on which employees are evaluated or measured. These should be regarded as primary tasks. They must not be made a lower priority. Urgent tasks have deadlines. Are the deadlines movable or not?

THE PRIORITISATION MATRIX



Modelled on Covey

- ▶ Go through the four fields in the matrix and discuss the difference between them. Explain that they should always be prioritised in this order: 1. important and urgent; 2. important and not urgent; 3. not important and urgent; and 4. not important and not urgent (these tasks are rarely relevant).
- ▶ Finally, help employees allocate tasks to the four fields. Challenge them – they should not place everything in field 1.

Agree with the employee that they should focus on fields 1 and 2, and that new tasks should always be plotted on the matrix before they start work on them. It is generally a good idea to help your staff plan their work, as this ability to plan is often impaired during the heated phase. Ask when and how they plan, and emphasise the importance of good planning during busy periods.

3. ENCOURAGE BREAKS AND SOCIAL CONTACT

Heated employees often skip breaks and have less contact with colleagues in order to save time and focus on work. However, breaks and social contact reduce stress, and you should encourage them.

You could, for example:

- ▶ Talk about how breaks aid performance. No one is superhuman – everybody needs to recharge their batteries. Studies show that breaks makes people perform better.
- ▶ Be a role model – invite your staff to breaks where you talk about anything but work.
- ▶ Maybe you can ‘walk and talk’ with them, i.e. discuss things while getting some exercise and fresh air?
- ▶ Talk about the effect of prolonged busy periods on the well-being of the team, and emphasise that it is important to be aware of the risks. Ask the team what else could be done.



HOW DO YOU PREVENT STRESS IN THE TEAM?

Stress may be restricted to a single employee, but the team culture may also play a role. Employees mirror each other to a great extent. They are inspired by and affected by each other's moods and working methods.

A competitive, fast-paced workplace culture may affect employees in a positive and motivating way. But it can also have a negative effect.

The way in which you talk about stress and strain in the team plays a major role. Is stress taboo? Is it something that only affects the weak? Or are we all at risk?

As a manager, you have the opportunity to influence your team and help it develop a constructive culture that emphasises both well-being and performance. Use the tool 'Take the temperature of your department' to study your workplace culture and introduce initiatives to prevent stress.

ASSESS YOUR TEAM

- ▶ WHAT ARE THE NORMS AND EXPECTATIONS WITHIN THE TEAM IN TERMS OF WORKLOAD AND EFFORT?
- ▶ WHO HAS A PARTICULAR INFLUENCE ON THE TEAM'S MOOD? IS THAT INFLUENCE POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE?
- ▶ WHAT IS THE CULTURE SURROUNDING WORKING HOURS? IS IT OK TO E-MAIL AND PHONE COLLEAGUES OUTSIDE OF WORKING HOURS?

TOOL:

Take the temperature of your department

MATERIAL:

The Steps of Stress, hand-outs featuring questions and a large flip chart

TIME:

Two hours

PROCESS:

1. **Go through the Steps of Stress** with your team.
2. **Divide the team into groups** of 3-4.
3. **Pose the following questions** and set aside 45 minutes for them to sit down and discuss them. Each group appoints a spokesperson to present its reflections and considerations to a plenary session afterwards. Where are you on the Steps of Stress, both in your department and in the company as a whole?
 - ▶ What has led to you being in that position on the steps? Try to clarify exactly what makes you 'more heated' and pushes you down the steps, and what makes you 'more temperate' and propels you upward.
 - ▶ What is being done to ensure that you, your colleagues and the company remain at the top of the steps? Could you do more or change how you work?
 - ▶ Can you formulate two proposals that could, within a relatively short time, help your department remain on – or return to – the top of the steps?
4. **The whole team meets in plenary again** and each sub-group presents their thoughts and suggestions for improvement. Write them up as headlines on a flip chart.
5. **Thematisation:** Once all of the groups have reported back on their discussions, it is time to look at headlines.
6. **Prioritisation:** In discussion with your staff, identify areas on which it is particularly important to focus. Are there any particular risks or stress factors that you should try to reduce, or resources and positive factors you should seek to strengthen?
7. **Action:** Agree on how to proceed from here. Should you set up a committee to continue work on the things that you have prioritised? Should you, as a manager, do anything in particular to initiate change?
8. **Follow-up:** Agree on a timetable for following up on what has been achieved today. For example, should you and the working group provide updates at monthly staff meetings, or convene a special meeting in three months?

WHAT AFFECTS HOW SUCCESSFUL YOU ARE AT PREVENTING STRESS IN THE TEAM?

Managers play a key role in preventing stress in their teams and ensuring that the workplace is motivating and efficient. But you are not the only one who exerts influence, and it makes sense to involve all those who have a responsibility and a role to play in the prevention of stress.

Managers should be aware that conditions at individual, group, management and organisational level are all important for both your own and collective efforts to prevent stress.



- **Individual** – the single member of staff
- **Group** – the team you lead
- **Leader** – the management at your workplace
- **Organisational structure**, culture, technology and policies at your workplace



THE INDIVIDUAL – DO YOUR STAFF SUPPORT YOUR EFFORTS TO PREVENT STRESS?

It may surprise you to know that not all employees are directly supportive of their managers' efforts to prevent stress. This is because you may seem to be encroaching on their work – or even interfering with how they choose to prioritise. Ambitious employees who are truly passionate about their work may have mixed feelings if you insist on talking about their working hours and performance.

What options are available to you?

- ▶ Talk about stress prevention as a collective endeavour and responsibility, and emphasise that nobody benefits from stress
- ▶ Tell them that stress prevention improves both performance and well-being.



THE GROUP – DOES THE TEAM HELP PREVENT STRESS?

If the team does not support you in your efforts to prevent stress, it may be difficult to make an impact at group level. The culture within the team plays a significant role in how the members interact. Stress is often a taboo subject within teams, and may give rise to conflicting emotions.

What options are available to you?

- ▶ Make stress a legitimate subject for discussion, e.g. talk about the Steps of Stress and take the temperature of the team
- ▶ Talk openly about the fact that you will only succeed in preventing stress if the team works with you.



THE MANAGEMENT IN YOUR WORKPLACE – HOW DOES IT AFFECT WELL-BEING AND STRESS?

If the management in your workplace has a well-rounded view of stress, and sees well-being as part of good performance, it is much easier to achieve good results with your preventive measures. On the other hand, if senior management considers stress something that only affects the weak, and that staff should just get their act together, this will make things more difficult.

What options are available to you?

- ▶ Talk to your boss about attitudes to and experiences of stress

- ▶ At management meetings, guide the discussion by presenting examples of management that promote both performance and well-being. Talk about cases of stress that arise in the team, or call for a general discussion on stress, well-being and performance – perhaps based on this pamphlet?



IDENTIFY THE STRESS AND WELL-BEING CULTURE AND POLICY IN YOUR WORKPLACE

These days, most large organisations have clearly set terms and conditions regarding working hours and illness. Some even have a specific stress policy. Both written policies and the general culture in your workplace are highly important for how difficult or how easy it is for you to succeed in your efforts.

What options are available to you?

- ▶ Find out what the organisation's policy is on working hours and whether there is a specific stress policy. Learn it and live by it.
- You may want to ask your HR department what they think about stress and well-being, and whether they have any experience they would like to share.

WHERE ELSE IS HELP AVAILABLE?

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.

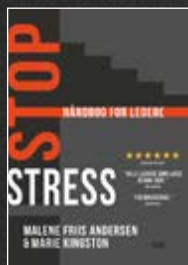
THIS PAMPHLET IS FOR

managers who want to be better at preventing 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
 - ▶ maintain the balance between demands placed on employees and their resources
 - ▶ motivate and develop your staff via discussion and dialogue
 - ▶ prevent stress by focusing on the six key factors
 - ▶ help employees who are developing stress
 - ▶ prevent stress in the team.
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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 and enter 'Lederne' in the subject field.

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