

Stress: a growing organisational issue

The crucial role of managers in preventing stress-related absences



Stress in the workplace is on the rise. The number of employees taking sick leave due to psychological symptoms has been increasing for years. Organisations are increasingly asking themselves: what can we do to prevent this? In this white paper, you read about which factors contribute to unhealthy (work-related) stress and what knowledge and skills managers need in order to effectively reduce stress.

Stress is *not* an individual problem. It is an organisational issue that calls for proactive action. Investing in prevention is not only humane, but also financially wise.

The mental health of many people in the Netherlands is under pressure¹. Absence due to psychological symptoms such as emotional exhaustion and burnout, has risen sharply in recent years. Data from HumanCapitalCare shows that absence due to stress-related complaints has grown by 43%². Young people are especially vulnerable³.

For employers, this not only means higher costs, but also a ripple effect: the rest of the team faces increased pressure.

Managers are under increasing pressure to relieve that strain, to support their staff and to provide guidance. At HumanCapitalCare, we are seeing this dynamic reflected in our consultations as well as in our training sessions. Managers want to support their teams, but they are also under a great deal of pressure themselves and are uncertain about the best way to approach this topic.

1 Why are we unable to get absenteeism due to psychological reasons under control?

Stress is a complex issue. It is caused by personal and work-related factors, as well as rapid changes in the workplace. Social, economic and technological transitions are increasing tension in the workplace⁴. This can be further compounded by financial worries, caregiving responsibilities and a diminishing sense of security. According to Schaufeli, this is not a new problem. In the past, it was not necessarily referred to as stress, but as neurasthenia⁵, for example.

Although employers are legally obliged to prevent work-related stress, they often lack an effective approach. All too often, stress is still seen as an employee's problem. As a result, the influence of organisational factors is not yet given sufficient attention.

A multidimensional, tailor-made approach is needed, with a continuous focus on mental health⁶. Stress is not static. It fluctuates, has diverse causes and manifests itself in a variety of ways. Sometimes it stems from external pressure, sometimes from internal belief systems or social tensions. Precisely because stress is so fluid and multifaceted, it requires more than just adjusting circumstances. Recognising these dynamics is essential for sustainable operations – by providing clear frameworks and creating space for resilience and emotional balance.

2 What can help?

Managers play a crucial role in identifying and reducing unhealthy stress levels in the workplace. Yet many managers perceive this responsibility as a burden. Why is that? They often lack an understanding of stress and stress-related symptoms, and do not always recognise changes in behaviour or find it difficult to raise the subject of stress⁷. In addition, there is often too little time or opportunity to address this issue.

Many managers struggle with stress levels in their teams. But we also see managers who are successfully managing stress within their teams. What sets them apart?

- **Self-awareness as a foundation:** They understand which factors and convictions cause stress – both in themselves and in their team members.
- **An open and safe working environment:** They create an environment where mental health, motivation and areas for improvement are discussed regularly. Knowing your team members is essential here.
- **Targeted influence:** They know exactly where they can intervene to reduce stress and promote a healthy work environment.

3 Stress at work can be managed

Unhealthy stress levels tend to arise from an imbalance between resources and job-related requirements. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model is widely used as a theoretical framework in occupational and organisational psychology to help understand work-related stress and motivation⁸⁻¹⁰. The model suggests that every profession has its own set of unique stressors and energy resources that influence employee well-being and performance. Managers who are aware of this and are able to influence it can prevent absenteeism due to stress.

Energy resources include, for example, social support from colleagues or managers, opportunities for development, autonomy, clearly defined tasks and varied work. Examples of stressors include the workload and work pace, emotional strain, cognitive strain and undesirable behaviour.

For instance, you are better able to cope with high emotional strain at work if you experience a great deal of social support in the workplace^{11,12}. It is therefore important for managers to work with employees to positively influence their energy resources. Not everyone experiences work in the same way. Personal resources such as vitality, health, personality and coping skills¹³ determine how well someone can deal with stress. Personal issues, such as a grieving process, can also reduce an individual's capacity to cope. A grieving process can reduce an employee's resilience and flexibility, for example. A temporary change in tasks and increased teamwork with colleagues can help an employee who is grieving feel supported. This helps prevent long-term absenteeism and boosts resilience.

④ Some of the absence caused by stress is linked to motivation. Why is that?

Motivation is a powerful safeguard against stress-related symptoms. If your work is interesting, you can cope with more pressure. But not all forms of motivation are equally valuable¹⁴. In particular, motivation that stems from personal convictions and intrinsic interest leads to greater well-being, better performance and sustainable employability¹⁵.

Moreover, intrinsic motivation promotes self-regulation. Employees who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to actively manage their own behaviours. They take responsibility for their work and for their health¹⁶.

⑤ Three keys to intrinsic motivation

To improve motivation at work, there are three key psychological needs that can be addressed: autonomy, connectedness and competence.

- **Autonomy:** this refers to the feeling that you can make your own choices and have influence over your work.
- **Connectedness:** this refers to the feeling of social connection and support in the workplace.
- **Competence:** this refers to the feeling that you are capable and can take action. When these needs are met, intrinsic motivation develops¹⁵.



⑥ Psychological safety as a prerequisite for addressing stress

Psychological safety is crucial in facilitating discussions about stress. This means that employees feel comfortable sharing ideas, mistakes and concerns without the fear of being judged¹⁷. An open and safe working environment is essential for discussing sensitive topics such as mental health and excessive workload, and for fostering intrinsic motivation. Regular conversations between employees and their managers are helpful in this regard¹⁸. To do this in a psychologically safe manner, the value and importance of (mental) health must be genuinely understood¹⁶ and beliefs towards stress must be positive and constructive. What helps here is a manager who can show vulnerability, who takes stress seriously and understands how complex stress can be. The organisation can help managers take responsibility for this by incorporating mental health into the vision and strategy of HR and the company^{16,18}.

⑦ Early signs of stress

Research shows that there are three early indicators that are strong predictors of long-term absenteeism: excessive worrying, apathy and tension¹⁹. These symptoms often appear before an employee reports in sick and can therefore serve as warning signs for managers and occupational physicians. If you recognise them and know how to respond, you can reduce or even prevent absences¹⁸⁻²⁰.

8 How do you promote the mental health of your team?

Mental health and resilience to stress require a multi-faceted approach. It starts with a positive and resilient mindset where the organisation, managers and employees all take joint responsibility for healthy working practices and mental well-being⁴. Rather than standing by helplessly, we need to create space for empowerment: the ability to actively contribute to solutions and recovery.

Managers play a crucial role in this. They not only serve as an example, they are also the link between policy and practice. Their attitude and behaviour have a direct impact on employee well-being. A manager who listens, contributes ideas and offers practical help can make a difference in preventing and recovering from stress-related symptoms^{21,22}. Many problems can be prevented by facilitating recovery time^{23,24} at an early stage, such as encouraging breaks, reducing stimuli²⁵ and monitoring work-life balance. This is a dynamic process and requires constant attention and adjustment²⁶.

Job crafting can be used to strengthen a sense of autonomy, connectedness and competence among employees.

This is achieved by adapting the work to the individual needs of employees. Everyone experiences work differently and deals with work-related stress and energy resources in their own way. We refer to the process of tailoring work to the individual as job crafting²⁷. For example, you can:

- Assign different tasks that are better suited to the employee or adapt existing tasks.
- Collaborate with other colleagues
- Learn to view work in a different way, so that it becomes more meaningful

The aim of job crafting is to gain more energy from work. Employees use their talents, learn new things and develop themselves. This leads to greater workplace satisfaction, increased motivation and reduced stress.



9 Making stress a topic that can be discussed and managed starts with the manager

To fulfil their role effectively, it is essential that managers possess sufficient knowledge, self-awareness and motivation. These competencies do not come naturally, but can be developed through training and coaching²⁸. This helps build a culture where mental health is a shared responsibility and everyone feels supported in remaining resilient in an ever-changing work environment.

Through self-reflection and awareness, managers learn to better understand and address stress within their team. This increases their motivation and ability to take action and removes the taboo surrounding stress. It requires new behaviour – from managers, teams and the organisation.

Because although stress is part of work and life, there is plenty we can influence to make stress work to our advantage and prevent unhealthy stress.

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This white paper was compiled by Marieke van Hoffen (Occupational Physician) and Annemieke Osendarp (Psychologist and HR Advisor).