

A Guide for Workers

Taking the Stress out of Stress

WORKERS



The project “Psychische Gesundheit in der Arbeitswelt – psyGA” (Mental Health in the World of Work)

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Foreword

Service and stress instead of industry and hard physical work"? If you wanted to achieve as powerful a summary as possible, you could accurately outline the change in the world of work with this one sentence. Anxiety disorders, depression or burnout syndrome are today just as much part and parcel of our modern – service-oriented world of work as hard physical work and work accidents are elements of industrialisation. Nowadays, everyone is talking about the subject of mental health – in one place, you can read the statistics of the health insurance funds about rising absenteeism rates due to mental problems, elsewhere about increasing stress and its consequences.

For the world of work, this means the need for proactive health management. It addresses measures for health promotion and prevention just as much as action with which workers suffering from mental disorders are helped in everyday working life and with their care and rehabilitation. The company health insurance funds have wide-ranging experience in workplace health promotion and prevention. For many years they have been supporting companies with appropriate services and advocating a modern company health and HR policy. We are convinced that the mental health of managers and workers not only boosts the company result and helps to improve the efficiency of our health system but also creates the foundation for each and every individual "to enjoy life and survive pain, disappointment and sadness", as the British Heart Foundation puts it so well. In other words: companies and people benefit equally from healthy conditions in the world of work.

In contrast to physical disorders, however, mental illnesses can often not be detected so easily as they generally involve complex symptoms which may also appear and develop in very different ways depending on the individual. Workers, those responsible for HR and managers therefore frequently feel at a loss and most people find it difficult to speak openly about this subject. A large number of promising and successfully tested tools and action programmes are now available. They show you what you yourself can do in the company to have a positive impact on your mental health. The brochure provides an overview and contains numerous tips and suggestions to put into practice.

I hope that these tips and suggestions will help you to overcome stress.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Heinz Kaltenbach', written in a cursive style.

Heinz Kaltenbach
 Director of the BKK Bundesverband (BKK Federal
 Association of Company Health Insurance Funds)

Working out how to enjoy life more...

The influence work has on one's health and satisfaction with life is very much an individual matter. It depends on a host of factors, some of which are shaped by personalities and the freedom of action employees enjoy in their workplace, others by work content and specific working conditions.

To most people, work means more than just the need to safeguard their livelihoods. Work is often part of a person's identity, it is important for self-esteem, it creates a stabilising framework for everyday life, it can be a source of satisfaction and promote confidence and self-awareness. It is also one of the most important areas for social contact. It is little wonder that people who are threatened – or who are already affected – by unemployment become ill comparatively more frequently.

On the other hand, work, like a lot of other obligations and tasks, can give rise to stress. Stress may – but not necessarily – have a negative impact on our well-being and our health. In the past, it was physical strains that affected workers. Mental stresses have become increasingly important in recent years. The pace of change in the world of work these days has led to faster processes, greater work intensification and dependence on technical developments, with often excessive workloads. Yet less challenging, repetitive jobs can bring their own stresses and even cause friction within teams. On top of this, there are the requirements of private life, the need to reconcile family obligations with work demands. The detailed planning necessary to fit everything in is a stress in itself for many.

The good news is...

Debilitating stress should not be regarded as inevitable or irreversible. On the one hand, we have the tools to create a positive influence in our working lives, while on the other hand, by changing our attitudes and behaviour, we are able, with often only small changes in our private lives, to obtain a better view of the causes of mental distress and identify ways in which we can eliminate or constructively overcome such stresses.

The incidence of mental illness in society has been rising steadily for years. Because many people spend a large part of their day at work, it is obvious that working life can be a factor in this. Ultimately, you can decide whether you submit passively to the mental stresses that occur or whether you make changes in your work situation and personal approach to lessen or eliminate potentially damaging stress. You should place as much emphasis on maintaining or improving your mental health as people do on physical health, which has long been promoted through such measures as a „balanced diet“ or „regular exercise.“

Your employer is required to be committed to the mental health of workers, based partly on a duty of care but ultimately because it impacts on the performance of the company. Only healthy, efficient and motivated employees deliver economic success. Our brochure for managers and companies refers to the obligations and opportunities companies have in this respect.

To sum up, an individual's enjoyment of life and mental health are greatly influenced by the conditions created by his environment and by his individual actions, characterised by attitudes and strategies (i.e. personal behaviour).

This brochure

- *outlines what you can do personally to identify the causes of mental stresses in your workplace and reduce or eliminate them. It shows the many ways, in both the workplace and at home, how you can cope with unavoidable pressures without your well-being or your mental health suffering. You will find information and advice here relating to 10 important areas of daily life, with advice on how to improve various situations. It shows what you can do to avoid 'bad' stress and how you can manage, in spite (or even because) of stress, to influence your work in such a way that it supports and improves your health and quality of life.*
- *It also provides you with information on which areas you and your company can tackle to help promote job satisfaction, motivation and a healthy state of mind.*

Work is good for you – if you follow this advice

The term „mental health“ can mean different things to different people. To some, it means not suffering from a mental illness such as depression or anxiety; to others it implies a robust, positive state of mind which enables people to enjoy life and cope well with its challenges.

Mental health is influenced by a host of conditions – physical, mental, social, emotional – and also environmental, either in work or in private life. Physical and mental health is always closely connected because of the effect they have on each other.

Most people with feelings such as dissatisfaction, frustration and excessive tension in their working or private lives can usually list the reasons. But why does one person threaten to break down under the stresses of everyday working life whereas a colleague working in the same circumstances turns up at the office or factory every day in a cheerful mood? If we want to learn how to cope with problems, one thing we must do is take a look at ourselves. We need to become more aware of how we react to what we perceive as difficult situations, how our problems affect our feelings and behaviour and recognise the things that we do – or don't do – that possibly contribute to the development of the problems and influence our responses.

So what is mental health? There are many definitions; we offer you this:

“Mental health is the emotional and spiritual resilience which enables us to enjoy life, and survive pain, disappointment and sadness. It is a positive sense of wellbeing and an underlying belief in our own dignity and self-worth.”

(British Heart Foundation 2008 / Think fit! Think well! A guide to developing a workplace mental wellbeing programme)

Be self-aware: Questions and Suggestions

- **Do you feel stressed, irritated or tired?**
 Tips on page 29 "Relaxation" and page 11 "Coping with stress".
- **Do you consider it essential, desirable or perhaps unnecessary for individual health and health promotion to play a role in your working conditions?**
 Read "You are not alone: the role of colleagues and employers" on page 15 and "Support at the workplace" on page 19 .
- **Do you feel anxious, disheartened or do you lack energy?**
 Go to page 20 "Keep moving".
- **Do you have problems with work colleagues?**
 Read on page 22 "Collegiality means more than just working together".
- **Do you lack self-confidence or do you feel uncomfortable at work?**
 Read more about this on page 23 "Identify and learn to appreciate your own strengths".
- **Do you have a problem that you would like to talk about?**
 Go to page 25 "Broach the subject!".
- **Does your work impact on your private relationships?**
 Read "Look after your personal relationships!" on page 26.
- **Do you think about how much alcohol you drink?**
 Go to page 27 "Drink sensibly".
- **Do you take medication on a regular basis?**
 Read on page 28 "Medication".
- **Do you eat and drink in such a way that you feel good?**
 Take a look at "Eat healthy food" on page 30.
- **Would you like to learn more about mental health?**
 Take a look at "Ask for help when you need it" and read about what we mean by mental health and mental illness – and where you can find help if you think you have a problem (page 33).

Look after yourself – you're worth it

If we make an effort to identify our personal needs and sensitivities and try to systematically exploit the possibilities for making things better by taking appropriate action, we can actively overcome stress and other mental pressures and improve our lives in many respects:

■ Physical health

- Your risk of putting on weight will decrease.
- The risk of high blood pressure and increased cholesterol levels will be reduced.
- The risk that you drink too much alcohol will fall.
- You will sleep better.

■ Quality of life

- You will achieve a better balanced relationship between private and working life.
- You will have more enjoyment in your leisure time and your relationships with family and friends.

■ Mental health

- You will have a positive basic attitude and an improved frame of mind.
- You can cope better under pressure and stress.
- You will have a higher self-esteem.
- Your concentration will improve.

■ Work and professional life

- You will benefit from greater satisfaction with your work.
- Your performance will improve.
- You will get on better with your colleagues.

Step by step guide to more fun and success at the workplace

The steps described on the following pages show how you can turn your workplace into a place which enriches and strengthens you. They show what you can do together with others and what you can expect from them but they also tell you how important your thinking, feelings and actions are for a positive outlook. The good thing about it is that even small changes in everyday life make it easier for you to cope with or eliminate difficulties, avoid low spirits and experience work not as a sequence of stresses but as part of everyday life which is literally worth living, in spite of all the challenges, through cooperation with your colleagues and successful results.

Take your current situation as a yardstick and start improving your thoughts and feelings in small, simple, incremental steps.

You will see: it is well worthwhile!

The measures described here can also help you to recover and cope better with stress if you are suffering from mental problems. See also „Ask for help when you need it“ on page 33.

STEP 1**Coping with stress**

Everyone suffers from stress at some time or other. Stress arises when we feel put under pressure, from one or even several sides, and when we believe that we cannot cope.

Each of us experiences stress in a different way and what one person perceives as being stressful may not be a problem for someone else.

For example, some people feel under pressure if they have to speak in front of an audience, whereas the opportunity to 'perform' gives others an adrenaline rush – and they enjoy doing it.

Being under pressure is part of everyday life, both at home and at work. At work, we have to motivate ourselves to be able to do our best. Job specifications and expectations help guide us and time pressures can bring out good performances in us. However, if the demands constantly take us to – or beyond – our limits, we feel stressed. The feeling of being unable to manage something adds to the stress from the actual tasks.

That means:

Constant stress at the limits of one's ability to cope and excessive demands can cause distress and illnesses.

Stress is a risk factor for:

- a weakening of the immune system (our physical resilience diminishes)
- high blood pressure
- diabetes
- increased cholesterol levels

These symptoms can lead to other illnesses. High blood pressure and increased cholesterol levels are, for example, risk factors for heart diseases.

People who are well balanced and lead a healthy, active life, are more likely to be able to cope well with stress. This personal "stress management" works all the better the sooner we recognise the warning signs and learn how to cope with it.

Checklist: the typical signs of stress

- You feel sweaty or shivering
- You have strong heart palpitations
- You have to go to the toilet much more often than usual
- You feel queasy in your stomach
- You feel exhausted
- You have a dry mouth more frequently
- You have unusual pains
- You smoke or drink more alcohol than usual
- You work until you are exhausted
- You have headaches more frequently
- You neglect your hobbies
- You are irritable
- You think „I can't cope with all that anymore“
- You lack self-confidence
- You have less desire for food, sex or other normally pleasurable things
- You eat too little or too much
- You have forgotten how to laugh
- You neglect your appearance
- You lose interest in other people
- You have the feeling everything is pointless
- You are more emotional than usual
- You suffer from forgetfulness
- You feel tired and have no energy
- You cannot get to sleep, do not sleep right through or wake up unusually early

Here we summarise the most frequent stress symptoms. If you suffer from several of these symptoms, you are possibly exposed to high mental stress – and we recommend you follow the advice given.

If you tick more than five boxes, you are already suffering from stress – or at least you are under considerable pressure.

However, talking generally, people can cope with such a situation. The earlier the causes are recognised the better. For then you can find ways and means of reducing the pressure and avoiding stress. A word of caution: Be very careful about using alcohol or tobacco as anti-stress aids. Ultimately they are hazardous to your health and can at best only temporarily distract you from mental problems.

You will find suggestions for coping with stress in the top tips for stress management on the next page (13).

Read more about the subject of Relaxation on page 29.

Top tips for stress management

Stress management has many aspects. With the following tips, you can create your own, comprehensive and effective anti-stress programme.

1. **Change the things that you can change.** Stress builds up gradually. It may therefore already help if you identify the stress factors at work. You should change the ones that you can change – even if they are only minor things (e.g. clearing up your desk or better organising your emails).
2. **Set yourself and others clear limits.** At the end of your working day you should switch off and not continue to dwell on work problems.. When you relax, recover well and sleep well, you are fit again for work the next day. It is generally not very helpful to repeatedly mull over the problems after work with colleagues, friends or your family. And if overtime or on-call duty is sometimes really necessary, you should make sure that this extra work does not become routine.
3. **Organise your day.** In stressful situations, people often no longer know what they should do next. If you think you cannot do all the work, try starting with the work that you have just received. Plan your day. For in half an hour of intensive and well organised work you could achieve just as much as if you mess around for an hour in chaos.
4. **Have intentional breaks.** Try not to relieve your tension with alcohol, nicotine or food. A walk around the block or even a few deep breaths can help to clear your head – it becomes easier to relax and develop new perspectives.
5. **Change your expectations.** One internal source of stress is when you demand too much from yourself. Examine your own expectations and aim for realistic objectives which you and your colleagues at work can actually achieve.
6. **Tell yourself to stop and reflect.** The more you put yourself under pressure during a task, the less chance there is that you will complete it satisfactorily. No matter how stressed you feel, take a little time and try to gain some distance. View the things from different angles and only then plan your next step. Learn to say „no“ if someone gives you additional work in such stress situations.
7. **Learn to talk.** Do not be frightened to talk to colleagues or ask for help. That is not a sign of failure but a sign of good teamwork.

Try it – it works!

Use this diary to list some of the anti-stress actions you intend to take this week. Many people find that identifying behaviours that they ought to change is the first big step towards making things better. It will also be a record of achievement.

Stress management diary

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

Saturday

Sunday

STEP 2**You are not alone****The role of colleagues and employers**

It is one of the responsibilities of your employer to look at working conditions and processes from the aspect of how they affect the health, both physical and mental, of the workers. That is not a task that can be performed at a boardroom table or simply according to a textbook. In combating the causes of mental stress, your employer has to rely on your suggestions, ideas and description of your problems. You should ask for specific support and information where needed. You should also accept offers of help from the company, such as health promotion opportunities – and play your part in an ongoing debate about further improvements to the working environment..

Do you control your work – or does it control you?

Experience in many companies has shown that the more autonomy you have and opportunity to design your workflow for greater effectiveness and manageability, the better you can tackle your sources of stress.

Talk to your manager or supervisor about the possibility of

- more variety in your tasks
- more freedom in the way you perform your work
- more freedom in the organisation of your working day
- more control over the design of your workplace
- an improvement in your work-life balance

Our parallel publication: Taking the Stress out of Stress – A Guide for Managers gives useful information on the possibilities for reducing stress in the workplace.

Reconciling work and private life

If you can decide on when, where and how you work, you can adapt your life better to your needs and possibilities. If you have the feeling that the ratio between your work and the rest of your life is no longer correct, talk to your supervisor to clarify what changes are possible.

What you can do:

- Assume personal responsibility for the reconciliation between professional and private needs: Raise the issue with your manager when requirements become too high.
- Work smarter, not longer:: Set priorities and postpone less productive activities.
- Take proper breaks from work instead of short interruptions just to grab a quick snack or a drink.
- Ask about the possibilities for designing work and working hours more flexibly.

Work requirements

Some of the most important causes of stress at the workplace are time demands, excessive work and job cuts. They can often combine to push pressures up to or beyond your personal ability to cope.

What you can do:

Talk to your supervisor about your situation. You should consider the following aspects beforehand:

- **Your work:** Are you coping well? Do you have the proper equipment and support? Do you have enough time to perform your tasks?
- **Your targets:** Are the targets set realistic and achievable for you and your department? Continually reassess when targets change.
- **Your working environment:** Problems with noise, temperature, air humidity etc? – Contact your supervisor.
- **Your reward:** Tell your supervisor if you do not feel sufficiently „rewarded“ for your work. It is not always a matter of money; personal recognition, more responsible work and professional promotion opportunities can show you how much your contribution is appreciated.
- **Your working hours:** You should
 - take time off as soon as possible after overtime
 - always take breaks at lunchtime and in between
 - always take your holidays.

Clarity is essential for progress

Your role and your field of responsibility at the workplace should be clearly defined. Otherwise, there is a risk of rushing from one task to another, becoming bogged down with details and being exposed to demands for which you lack the necessary knowledge – excessive workloads are then almost inevitable.

- Make sure there is a clear and up-to-date job description which explains your tasks exactly.
- If you are working for more than one supervisor, ensure there is a clear understanding surrounding who expects what from you so that you do not get caught between a rock and a hard place.
- Make sure that you are appropriately trained for your tasks.

Good relationships with colleagues

Relationships at the workplace can help boost your job satisfaction and performance. You can make a contribution to this by cooperating closely with team colleagues or other departments.

Bullying and harassment

Familiarise yourself with the guidelines on bullying and harassment in your company. You should know how to submit a complaint and what happens next – in the event that you or one of your colleagues is bullied or harassed.

Communications – talk to each other

Good and respectful communications help to reduce stress in companies and other organisations.

What you can do:

- Actively take part in team and department meetings or workforce meetings.
- Work together with others on staff information.
- Give your superiors feedback – either personally, using the suggestion box or in other ways

Changes in the company

Changes in the company and uncertain employment conditions often contribute to mental problems among workers. Changes are sometimes unavoidable but there are different ways of implementing changes. Good companies make sure they inform the workforce and get them involved.

If you do not feel sufficiently well-informed, make inquiries. Prepare a list of questions on the planned changes together with colleagues. The staff representatives (staff or works council) should offer every employee a platform where he can actively participate in the development of changes.

Don't forget:

The feeling of being helplessly exposed to detrimental situations can even intensify mental health problems. If, on the other hand, you yourself actively improve situations and their conditions and, at the same time, are supported by your employer, this will have a positive impact on your mental well-being and your work performance.

STEP 3**Support at the workplace**

A good working environment boosts your mental health. If you can trust others and people are open with you, if you feel respected and are able to identify problems and ask for help, it is much easier to prevent mental health problems arising or counteract them in good time.

If you are feeling stressed or have mental health problems...

- ***inquire about what support the company can offer you:***
e.g. from the company doctor, the company's social service or whether there are any workplace health promotion activities available.
- ***consult your own GP, an expert or one of the many aid organisations for people with mental health problems.*** You will often receive initial and valuable information on a telephone hotline or via their website.
- ***if you think that you could do your job better with sensible changes, talk to your supervisor.***

The objective here may be...

- to reduce working hours
- to be allowed time off work for appointments at doctors and therapists
- (more) supervision
- a new field of activity
- any opportunity to work from home

If you have been off work because of a mental illness, talk to your company about a gradual reintegration into everyday working life when you are ready to return.

Only those who are informed can take the right action!

Take advantage of all information, training courses or other measures which your employer offers on this subject. For it is important that you recognise problems with colleagues or yourself and know where and how you can get help. It is very possible that your employer provides information on mental health at the workplace. If there is nothing currently available, make inquiries.

STEP 4**Keep moving**

Physical activity is an outstanding way to improve both physical and mental health. If you exercise reasonably vigorously (we're not looking for peak performances!), for just 30 minutes a day, at least five days a week, that reduces your risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes or strokes appreciably. For beginners, it is sufficient to start off by exercising enough to breathe more deeply and readily start to sweat.

Regular physical activity can also help if you are feeling uncertain or anxious or if you are disheartened or stressed; it helps combat such moods. The majority of people who are active relax more easily and simply feel better.

Even when you are active during work „feel-good hormones“ are released in your body. They ensure that you are further motivated even by small successes. You also improve your ability to concentrate and learn and make cooperation with colleagues easier.

Examine your working day and check when you can incorporate short periods of physical activity in order to achieve your „30 minutes a day“ target. Whether you sit or stand the whole day, even a little exercise, a few stretches or intentional change in your sitting or standing position will help you to relax physically and mentally. The important thing is to find activities which you enjoy and integrate them into your daily life.

You can for example:

- go some or all of the way to work on foot
- go to work on a bicycle
- use the stairs instead of escalators and lifts
- go for a short brisk walk in the lunch break
- keep some time free before or after work for a walk, a game of squash or badminton, some swimming or a brief training period in the gym
- play football, volleyball, handball or tennis in a team – whatever you enjoy doing. And if there is no team yet, go ahead and set one up!

Use this diary to plan what exercise you will take this week as part of your anti-stress programme. It will also be a record of achievement.

Exercise diary

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

Saturday

Sunday

STEP 5 Collegiality

Collegiality means more than just working together

When work and private life are in a sensible balance, it is easier to draw strength and support from work, to recognise opportunities in difficult times and to actively resolve issues instead of accepting them as destiny. Friends and good colleagues are important to achieve this balance between work and home – they make it easier to enjoy life and they can support you when you are feeling down.

Friendships have to be nurtured – even in work

Good relationships at work can help you and your company. They facilitate understanding, promote creativity and team spirit, they make it easier to address difficult issues such as misconduct and enable conflicts to be tackled constructively, in a healthy manner. Friendships and sound relationships are a strong bulwark and can even be a cure for stress – and therefore promote the efficiency of all colleagues.

A good atmosphere among colleagues also facilitates cooperation, they make it easier for you to introduce new ideas and they help you feel “part of a family” at work.

Therefore:

- be open with close colleagues, talk to them about feelings and moods
- do not sacrifice your good relations with workmates for the sake of competition
- do not take professional criticism personally (even when justified) – and do not settle professional criticism at a personal level
- spend some of your leisure time with your close colleagues occasionally, taking part in or watching sport, eating together etc.

STEP 6**Know your own strengths****Identify and learn to appreciate your own strengths**

Only when you accept yourself and are aware of your „value“ can you achieve a balanced approach to life and feel good.

That means:

- Look after yourself.
- Pay attention to your physical health – eat well, sleep well, stay active and enjoy life.
- See yourself as an independent and valuable personality who does not have to constantly prove himself.
- Judge yourself according to sensible, i.e. not exaggerated, criteria.

People who accept and value themselves cope better with their life and their work. The following tips can help you to like yourself more and build up self-confidence and self-esteem.

Your best is always enough!

Do everything as well as you can. The aim is not to do something to perfection for you can also learn from mistakes – and that is also a positive aspect.

Don't forget: you are constantly changing – quite naturally.

Everyone develops and every change brings the possibility of an improvement – if you seize the opportunity. Therefore, use every offer at the workplace for change and further development – if it helps you to reach your objectives.

Trust in yourself!

Self-confidence decides how we value our abilities.

Self-confidence comes from within and can be enhanced by various influences:

- ***Only if you try out new methods at work*** can you develop new skills.
- ***If you set yourself realistic targets***, you can enjoy your successes and performance more quickly.
- ***Self-confidence can be practised***: imagine how you would behave if you felt really self-confident as soon as you are confronted with an unpleasant situation – e.g. a staff appraisal talk. If you transfer this idea into practice, that can actually increase your self-confidence.
- ***Learn from your mistakes!*** Mistakes are unavoidable – and they do not harm as long as they do not permanently damage your self-confidence.
- ***Do not hesitate to ask for help*** if the demands set out are unrealistic.

STEP 7**Broach the subject!**

Problems which are not put into words cannot be solved. Talking with people you trust can create a feeling of security and togetherness – and outline ways towards positive changes. If you have problems at work or other worries that reduce your efficiency, it is good if you have someone with whom you can openly discuss these things.

The golden rule is:

There is always someone you can talk to – be it your supervisor, a colleague, the company doctor or one of the staff representatives. These people will help you and are concerned about you – and they will often appreciate being asked by you for advice.

We recognise that it is not always easy to talk about your own problems or weaknesses. However, open talks in a spirit of trust can help you

- to see problems from a different angle.
- to gain a new insight into the causes and possibilities for action.
- to recognise that your problem also affects other people and triggers similar feelings.
- to develop solutions which you would not have thought of on your own.
- to clear your head of thoughts which otherwise occupied you alone.

Listening is the first step towards helping

You, too, can support friends or colleagues by talking to them. Here it is important to be a good listener. It can be a great help to friends and colleagues when they are feeling down. You can help others to see things more clearly and develop solutions to problems. Be honest but considerate about the feelings of the person you are talking to.

Accept professional help when you need it

You can practice talking and listening. Try it out for it will help you to share feelings and anxieties with other people.

With some mental problems it is better to look for professional help (see page 33: „Ask for help when you need it“).

STEP 8**Personal relationships****Cherish your personal relationships!**

Good personal relationships are part of a healthy and balanced life. They are a source of appreciation and mutual support. They offer space where you can literally talk openly and in a relaxed manner about everything that governs your life and your personal experiences.

We look after people with whom we have a close relationship. These relationships give us the feeling of being needed, of being part of a community. Good relationships and mental health go hand in hand. And anyone who is „networked“ with other people has a lower risk of having numerous mental health problems.

That means:

Personal relationships also help determine our attitudes and feelings in everyday life, including at work. Well-functioning personal relationships can even protect us from mental illnesses such as depression – but these relationships have to be looked after, e.g. making the effort to keep in contact socially or arranging to meet up, offering a helping hand when required, sharing leisure pursuits etc.

And that also includes:

Problems should be solved as quickly as possible and not put off indefinitely.

Take your time!

It is not always easy to find time for friends, pursue one’s hobbies or indulge in sports or cultural interests, especially when work demands a lot from you. Do not forget that only a balance between professional and private life permits you to switch off and relax. It thus ensures that you can develop all your abilities.

Work is important for a fulfilled life. But if life is governed solely by work, then stress and the feeling of being unable to cope is more or less inevitable. Anyone who has a private life and values it, who looks after the relationships within his own family, with friends and also with work colleagues, is more balanced and able to cope better with major difficulties when the need arises. And they therefore also have better chances of maintaining good mental health.

By contrast, anyone who permits stress at work to have a constant negative impact on their private life loses a crucial tool in constructively dealing with mental stresses. It is important, especially when work requires a lot of time and energy, not to forget that even small changes can bring you more time for friends and leisure activities.

Important:

- You must take all your annual holiday entitlement – your company won’t collapse without you, but you may collapse if you don’t have decent breaks!
- If overtime cannot be avoided, keep it within reasonable limits. We work to live, not vice-versa.

STEP 9**Drink sensibly**

For many of us, alcohol is part and parcel of social get-togethers and everyday life. In fact, small amounts of alcohol have been linked with an improvement in emotional, mental and physical health. However, the regular consumption of alcohol is not a therapy for mental stresses and strains or other illnesses but can in fact jeopardise both physical and mental health.

Many people drink alcohol to better cope with feelings or situations where they believe that they cannot really deal with them in a different way. That also includes difficulties at the workplace. We tend to simply block out the feelings of anxiety, depressive moods or other deeper mental problems. Alcohol only appears to help. With alcohol we can initially relax for a short time but in the long term alcohol increases feelings of anxiety. That can appreciably reduce work performance and even result in depression.

Here are the latest recommendations for consuming alcohol in moderation:

- Men should not drink more than 2 to 3 „units“ a day.
- Women should not drink more than 1 to 2 „units“ a day.
- This recommendation does not apply to pregnant women and mothers who are breast-feeding – they should not drink alcohol at all.
- If you have drunk considerably more, perhaps more than „one too many“; it is usually best to do without alcohol completely for 48 hours so that your body can recover.

What does one „unit“ of alcohol mean?

A unit corresponds to 10 g of pure alcohol, in other words approx. 0.25 litres of beer, 0.15 litres of wine or one and a half small glasses (0.02 litres) of spirits.

STEP10 Medication

Medicines are a blessing – when they are used in the correct dose to treat certain illnesses. And they may be sensible in the treatment of some mental illness... in many cases they may even be essential. But anyone who takes medicine for normal mood swings, minor ailments, to combat stress or as „a relaxation aid,“ is in fact increasing the risk to his mental health.

If medicines are not expressly prescribed by a doctor, the regular intake of medication is likely to result in problems at work and in your private life.

Painkillers, stimulants and sedatives can result in serious, irrevocable organ damage if taken improperly. Moreover, their supposed positive effect on the psyche is reversed relatively quickly into the opposite and the risk of drug addiction is enormous. Many active substances lose their effectiveness if taken continuously. That encourages people to increase the dose and heightens the risk that the medicines remain ineffective when they are actually needed for medical reasons.

Drug abuse also leads frequently to so-called inverse or paradox effects. That means that the active substance at some time creates the symptoms which it is actually intended to combat. For example, the constant consumption of headache painkillers in the long term often causes headaches which may even become chronic.

If you do not know whether your consumption of medication is detrimental or if you already have problems with medication addiction, you should definitely talk about it with your GP.

STEP 11**Relaxation****Tips for relaxation and maximum concentration**

Without relaxation, human beings don't work very well. Most of us have developed very personal methods of relaxation which help us to feel at peace with the world – at least some of the time! Relaxation can release energy, eliminate anxieties, prevent irritability and even reduce pains caused by tension. These include, for example, neck pains, back pains, headaches – muscular problems which are also triggered by work. Only those people who can relax can concentrate on one thing at a time, feel better and cope better with difficulties.

Anyone who is constantly “a livewire” because work demands a lot from him or after work he is exposed to high expectations from his family, often has the feeling he simply cannot relax under such conditions. Such people often blame a lack of time, little peace and quiet or the opportunity to be on their own.

But that is simply not true, you can learn to relax and there are many simple relaxation methods which you can use at almost any time and at any place.

Everyone needs time for himself, time to switch off and find peace of mind. If you take time for this, you will gain new energy and can perform your work more effectively.

Here are a few simple relaxation tips

Try out the „Rapid relaxation programme“ (below).

Take time for this regularly!

Use your work breaks to leave your routine behind you in order to occupy yourself in a different way. Meet with colleagues and do something which distracts you from the problems of work for a short time. Exercise also promotes relaxation („Keep moving“ on page 20).

The rapid relaxation programme

- Learn how to breathe consciously: Breathe in deeply, hold your breath, then say to yourself „now out“ and breathe out deeply. Continue to breathe like this naturally for some time and become aware of every time you exhale.
- Change consciously between tensioning and relaxing individual groups of muscles.
- For example, tense your hand muscles, hold for a moment and then release. Do the same with the muscles in your foot or stomach. During the relaxation phase, try to let all the tensions „flow out“ of your body.
- Relax your shoulders, allow them to drop.
- Use this (or your personal) relaxation technique consciously before or during challenging and stressful situations. You will quickly realise how much good that does you.

STEP 12 Eat healthy food

You are what you eat. This well-known saying has long since been included in good nutrition guides. Our nutritional and drinking habits not only influence our physical and mental performance; anyone who eats a healthy and balanced diet also improves his mood and ability to concentrate and is better protected against feelings of anxiety and phases of depression.

Anyone who follows the simple rules of the „healthy food plate“ is eating relatively healthy food. The „healthy food plate“ shows how much the various types of foods should contribute to our daily food intake – in other words, everything that you eat and drink and that also includes small snacks and nibbles.

Therefore, your daily menu should include the following:

1. Lots of bread, rice, potatoes, pasta or other starch-containing foods. Buy wholemeal products – including cereals – where possible.
2. Lots of vegetables
3. Lots of fruit
4. A little milk and a few dairy products
5. Some meat, fish, eggs or other protein-containing foods
6. Small amounts of foods with a high fat or sugar content
7. Beverages: best of all water or unsweetened tea.



The „healthy food plate“
(Source: DGE – German
Society for Nutrition)

The best tips for healthy eating at work

1. **Do not leave out any meals!** With a healthy breakfast you provide your body with the energy for the new day. Many people leave out a meal during the working day, for one reason or another, but most often due to time pressures. Don't think that you really save time and you can do the work faster if you dispense with regular meals. For if you do not have enough „fuel“ to see you through the afternoon, you will find it difficult to maintain your efficiency – and you need longer for individual tasks.

What you can change: Take time for breakfast and regularly eat something at lunchtime.

2. **Drink lots of water!** Over 60% of your body consists of water; thirst is only the first sign of dehydration (lack of liquid). Anyone who drinks too little also experiences other symptoms which may have a negative impact on performance. These include headaches, fatigue and irritability, a lack of concentration and confused thinking.

What you can change: Make it your intention to drink at least one litre of water during the working day!

3. **Make sure you have a good energy balance and thus prevent mood swings.** High sugar content in food leads to fluctuations in your blood sugar level, which has a negative impact on energy balance and your moods. A brief „energy high“ is followed by an „energy hole“ and your body feels tired and listless.

What you can change: Do not be tempted by biscuits in the meeting room or nibbles which are passed round the office. It is better to take a fruit or vegetable snack..

4. **Do something for your digestion: To ensure that the body can absorb nutrients, it must digest meals well.** That becomes much easier if you move a little for a few minutes after eating. In this way, your mind becomes free of the workloads and gains energy for the rest of the day.

What you can change: Better than sitting around after eating is to move around a little and literally give your digestive system more room so that the food can easily find its way through your body.

5. **Eat a balanced diet: Meals rich in starch prevent fluctuations in your energy balance and your concentration.** In view of its content of plant fibres and nutrients, wholemeal cereal is particularly well suited as nutrition which promotes performance. It is digested slowly and thus provides the body with energy steadily over a prolonged period.

What you can change: Do not make life too easy for yourself and eat what is simply available – for all too often that is industrially processed food. Instead, plan your meals and change over to food rich in starch such as bread, rice, potatoes and pasta; and eat wholemeal products whenever you have the choice.

Eat-healthy-food diary

With our eat-healthy- food diary you can plan how you would like to change your eating habits and document what you have achieved

Eat-healthy-food diary

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

Saturday

Sunday

STEP 13**Ask for help****Ask for help when you need it**

Sometimes we cannot cope with a problem alone and need help. And you can count on one thing: help is available in almost every case, especially when you are desperate or think that you have a genuine mental problem. For you are not alone, many other people have the same or similar problem. Those who seek help in good time have a much better chance of a complete recovery. It is quite possible to learn strategies to cope with mental problems and in this way lead a fulfilled and active life. However, the best offers of help are only useful if the individual concerned takes advantage of them. Therefore the most important thing is that you look for help as soon as possible – and one place where you can ask about that is your work.

What is mental illness?

Mental illnesses are problems which impair mental health and your mental and spiritual well-being – just as a broken bone impairs your physical health. In the world of work the question as to how many employees suffer from stress, anxiety, depression and other mental problems was neglected for a long time. Nowadays, it is estimated that within one year almost one in three adults in Germany suffers from some type of mental health problem.

Mental illness covers a wide field such as anxiety or mild depression down to more serious illnesses such as schizophrenia or personality disorders. Whereas, for example, a bone fracture can be detected (and treated) in everyone in the same way, mental illnesses tend to differ from person to person.

Owing to the variety and individual characteristics of mental problems it is not easy to decide when you need help.

Everyone is stressed, disheartened or insecure now and again. However, if these feelings last longer than two weeks, stop you from eating, sleeping or working, if your personal relationships suffer as a result, or you do injury to yourself, it is definitely time to ask for help.

Talking is key – at work or with external specialists

Colleagues notice changes in your behaviour particularly quickly and are often concerned. In that case, a conversation can take away your anxiety and be a help to you.

However, such talks need a solid basis of trust so consider who you can inform about your questions and problems.

If, for some reason, you do not feel able to raise your problems with workmates or anyone else in your company, you should contact an external specialist. But, if you can, it is a good idea to hold talks with a supervisor you trust, someone from the HR department, a member of the works council, the company doctor, employees in the company's social advice centre or health promoters in the company. They are in a better position to do something immediate, if required, with your work situation which might help relieve at least some of your major concerns.

Ask yourself the following:

- How does your mental problem affect you, your family and your work?
- Can you count on support from friends, family and colleagues to improve the situation?
- What are the greatest hurdles which have to be overcome in coping with the acute problem?
- What support would you like at work?

And also ask: is there anyone at your work who might need help and has not dared to ask for it so far? **Offer your help.**

Talk to your GP

Your GP may well be the first person you contact in the event of mental problems or a lack of enjoyment of life. He will help you with advice and refer you to a specialist – a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a consultant or another expert, depending on the nature of the problem – or prescribe you medication as appropriate.

Other people to contact

There are many local and national organisations which offer free and confidential hotlines, brochures and advice. Ask your health insurance fund, the social services of your city, the health office or where you live, a telephone crisis line or your GP.



Project publications:



Taking the Stress out of Stress A Guide for Managers

You find the brochures for download
or order in our onlineshop:
<http://www.bkk.de/psyga>

Gefördert durch:



aufgrund eines Beschlusses
des Deutschen Bundestages

Im Rahmen der Initiative:



Fachlich begleitet durch:



Projekträger:

