

Staying at work with mental health problems: a guideline for supervisors

With reasonable accommodations, you make it possible.



Occupational health and inclusive employment – research group

HAN_ UNIVERSITY
OF APPLIED SCIENCES

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Reading instructions

Reading Time: 3 minutes

What is this guideline about?

Mental health problems occur in one in five workers, which is 20% of your team. As a supervisor, you may wonder how employees who experience these problems can continue working. This may be from an economic perspective, to prevent absenteeism and the high costs associated with it. But it could also stem from a sense of social responsibility, aiming to make the most of the talents and potential within the workforce. You're not alone in facing this challenge as it is indeed difficult to support someone in the right way to help them stay at work. However, employers can have a significant impact on employees with 'mild' psychological issues. This guideline is here to help with that.

For whom is this guideline?

This guideline focuses on supervisors, because as a supervisor you are often the first point of contact for your employees. It is about supporting employees with common mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and stress-related issues. It is not applicable in cases of severe psychiatric problems. The guideline can also be used by HR advisors or informal leaders in self-directing teams. The guideline has been prepared with an occupation health perspective: what is suitable work and what can the work environment and work accommodations do to keep an employee with mental health problems at work.

In this guideline, we speak in the "he" form for readability. Of course, "he" can also be read as "she."

Reading instruction:

The guideline is translated from Dutch to English, the authors are not native English speakers. The guideline consists of a pdf file.

Website link in Dutch <https://www.han.nl/projecten/blijven-werken-met-psychische-klachten/index.xml>

The following characters are used to clarify the corresponding actor for each action:



The employee



HR/management



Supervisor



Team and supervisor



Supervisor and employee

What do we mean with mental health problems?

Mental health problems are difficult to recognize both for the person experiencing them and for others.. A mental health problem can turn into a mental disorder. Think of depression, anxiety, stress or burnout. Additionally, everyone experiences periods of high stress or imbalance at some point in their life.

When someone is struggling with mental health, the following signs could be involved:

- Poor sleep
- Overthinking
- Feeling too tired to do things
- Difficulty to concentrate
- Forgetfulness
- Easily angry or crying quickly
- Feeling gloomy or anxious
- Avoiding social contact

These symptoms often appear together. For example, someone who feels down and underperforms may also experience anxiety, leading to burnout.

In this guideline, we focus on signs and behavioral changes in the workplace, not on underlying diagnoses or disorders. Nevertheless, we give a brief explanation of common mental disorders:

Feeling depressed

A period of great gloom or emptiness. Or a feeling emotionally flat, lasting several months. Sometimes longer, then it becomes chronic.

Being anxious / panicked

This could be a specific fear, such as a fear of elevators, or general anxiety, where someone constantly worries about various things. Panic attacks may also occur.

Experiencing stress (due to overwork and burnout)

Employees express to be overworked by making statements such as: sitting through it, overworked, stuck, overworked, the bucket is overflowing. In doing so, they mention a clear cause of the stress. Overwork can turn into burnout, because in burnout symptoms last longer than six months. In burnout, employees feel completely exhausted mentally, emotionally and physically.

Summary: my employee has mental health problems, what should I do?

The guideline gives you five tools *as soon as* mental health problems occur or appear at work. These tools help you to think about: can I influence this, what can I do and how do I communicate this with my employee, team and organization? This requires a tailored approach, because each situation is different.

Short checklist to see where you stand as a supervisor:

- ✓ Do you see behavior changes in your employee? Read more in tool 1 about recognizing signals.
- ✓ Do you see your employee is struggling with something? Are you approachable and easily accessible? A listening ear can already provide relief. See tool 2 on having conversations.
- ✓ Do you tend to want to solve your employee's problem yourself? See tool 3 on encouraging autonomy.
- ✓ Are you unable to find suitable solutions with your employee? See tool 4 on work accommodations.
- ✓ Do you suspect that someone may be about to drop out but don't know what to do? See tool 5
- ✓ Does the employee trust you? See **Know your employee** about building trust.
- ✓ Want to know how to discuss a healthy safe work climate with team members? See **Strengthen Your Employee**.

Take action to support your employee

1. [Recognise changing behavior in time](#)
 1. Recognize the signs: physical (headache, fatigue), psychological (irritable, anxious) or changing behavior (more/less social, less productive).
 2. Show that you are there. Build and keep the connection.
2. [Talk about the impact of mental health problems at work](#)
 1. Create space for a personal conversation.
 2. By listening and showing understanding, you are already offering support.
 3. These conversations are difficult. Prepare well.
3. [Encourage employee's autonomy and sense of responsibility](#)
 1. Offer space and coach your employee to find solutions on their own.
 2. Facilitate employee in finding and trying different opportunities, out of the box.
4. [Find work accommodations together](#)
 1. Ask what the employee needs.
 2. Make clear working agreements about work accommodations. Evaluate these as well.
5. [Ask for support when you see a risk of sick leave](#)
 1. Stay in touch with the employee, even with reduced attendance.
 2. Don't wait.

Essential elements for good work relations, also *before* mental health problems affect work

Know your employee: basic ingredients for a good working relationship

- Work preventively: show commitment and interest. Explore risk factors and interventions.

Strengthen your team and organization: basic ingredients for a "mentally healthy workplace"

- Be alert to patterns among multiple staff members. Facilitate social support and safety in the team and mental health literacy.

Do you have limited time? Quickly read the box IN SHORT, at the beginning of each tool.

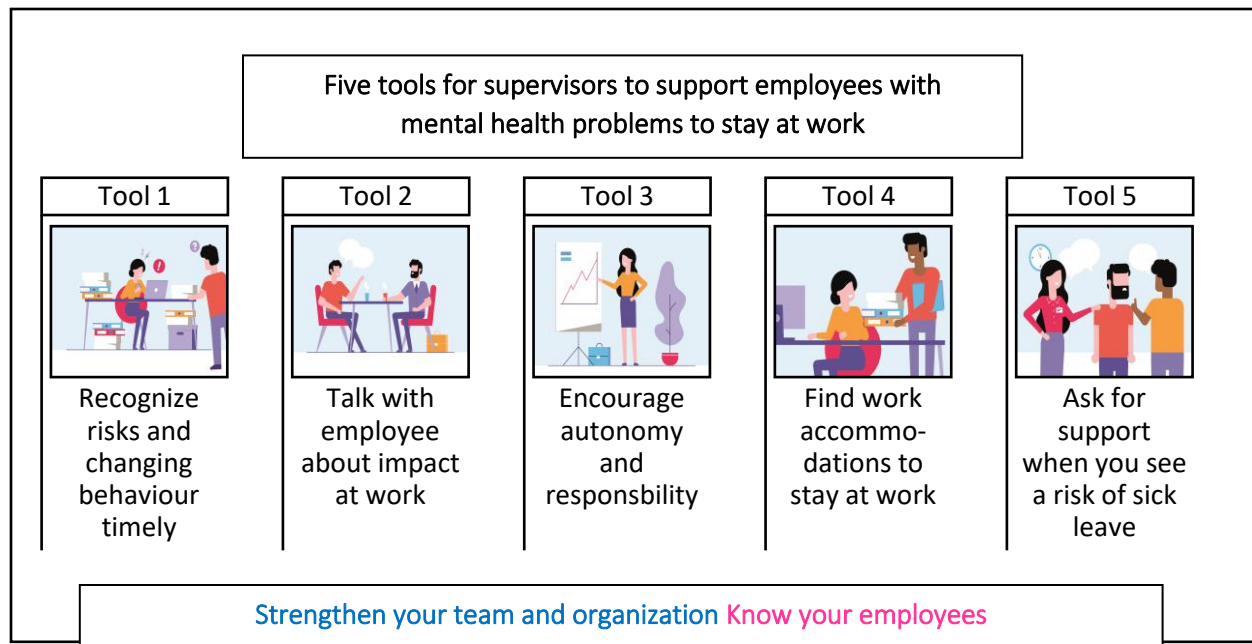
Does this happen often in your team? Are you stuck or you wish to develop yourself? Study each tool!

Take action: a comprehensive approach to improve mentally health workplaces

Every employee and every situation is different. These five tools can help you provide the right support. What is needed at which moment? That decision is yours as a supervisor, based on your insights, experience, and common sense. These tools follow the 'journey' of your employee, from early signs that may affect their work, to the point of potential absenteeism.

You will find detailed information for each tool.

1. [Recognize changing behavior in time](#)
2. [Talk together about the impact at work](#)
3. [Encourage employee's autonomy and responsibility](#)
4. [Find work accommodations to stay at work](#)
5. [Ask for support when you see a risk of sick leave](#)



How can your organization support you as a supervisor in preventing absenteeism?

Reading Time: 3 minutes



Why? Supporting these employees is not something you do alone. As a supervisor, you want to effectively recognize, discuss, and address mental health problems. . That's why help from your organization is essential.

Customized checklist: the role of team and organization in supporting employee with mental health problems.

- ✓ Are colleagues informed about signs and risk factors?
- ✓ Is there time and attention for the supervisor to intervene?
- ✓ Does the employer organize training for management and supervisors in promoting employee (mental) health?
- ✓ Does organization provide space for treatment that employee needs or mutual support and networking among employees?
- ✓ Is there a plan in the organization for psychosocial workload?
- ✓ What does the internal or external Occupational Health and Safety Service do, in the context of prevention and job retention?

- The organization limits the *span of control* of you as a supervisor. This is the number of employees to whom you can lead as effectively as possible. This allows for time and attention to recognize, communicate about, and act on issues. It also matters how you are evaluated as a manager. If senior management prioritizes employee wellbeing and incorporates this into your performance as a leader, it can positively influence your approach. Senior management should reward leaders who can keep employees engaged and thereby reduce absenteeism. The organization facilitates training in management skills and conversing, if you wish.
- The organization provides space for treatment for employees.
 - o Providing medical or psychological treatment is often not enough to restore balance and enable employees to stay at work. Moving on without (work) accommodations is also ineffective. A combination of two approaches is often necessary: individual treatment and finding suitable work or (temporary) work accommodations. As an employer, you are also required to organize support and provide space for it. For example, allowing time during work hours for treatment.
- The organization provides space for strengthening employee networks
 - o Setting up a buddy system or employee network is possible. Employees with mental health problems can offer and receive mutual support there.

HR or business council and/or senior management:



- Distribute messaging (a newsletter) about safety and healthy work environment
- Newsletter with photos and videos related to mental health
- Engage people with lived experiences on a larger scale in the organization
- Commit to a safe working climate.

How can the occupational health professional (OHP) support you in preventing absenteeism?

Occupational health and safety service or external occupational health professional

- It is important that these services be accessible for advice in a low-threshold manner
- A social medical consultation, where company doctor, OHP, HR and supervisors discuss employees with absenteeism to facilitate RTW and promote SAW.
- The occupational physician advises how medical causes affect work and whether treatment can then help, such as from psychologist.
- The OHP helps to look for suitable work, work accommodations in the meantime and the match between abilities and requested work. They are neutral and independent.
- Engage the right professional in time (occupational health professional or regular care) and refer for assessment and treatment. Not sure which professional to engage best? Then seek advice on this from a colleague or the occupational health and safety service itself.

1. Recognize risks and changing behavior in time

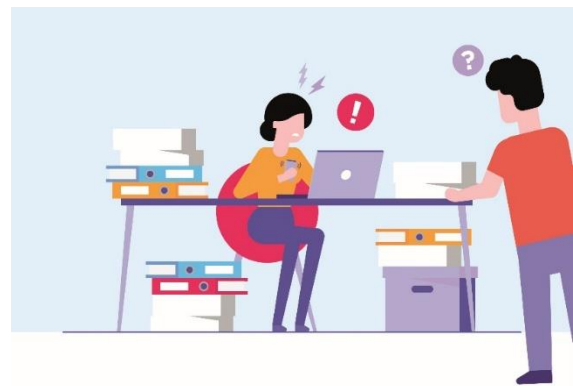
Reading Time: 4 minutes

In short

- One in five working people experience common mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety or stress, in their lifetime.
- Identify change in your employee's behavior in time.
 - o Physical signs or changes (back pain, headaches, fatigue)
 - o Psychological signs or changes (irritable, emotional, anxious, indecisive, employee comes across as dull)
 - o Behavioral changes (decreased functioning, lower productivity, difficulty interacting with colleagues or clients, difficulty with change, is tense or cynical, or withdraws)
- Examine your own beliefs and perceptions about mental health and illness.
- Show that you are there and put out your feelers. Find the connection with each other. Do you have little experience with this? Read on below, seek advice from occupational health and safety professionals and share your concerns.

You as a supervisor know this situation....

- *As a supervisor, you suspect that an employee is experiencing mental health problems and want to help, but the employee does not share anything on their own, thinking it's too personal to discuss with you.*
- *You notice changes in their behavior, but they either don't recognize it themselves or don't come to you for support.*



Why is this so important?

Ensuring that your employee can stay at work starts with recognizing signs of any imbalance or different behavior in the workplace.

You, as a supervisor, along with your employee, are responsible for recognizing and discussing these issues. One sign is not enough to draw conclusions. The combination of multiple signs is an indication that action needs to be taken.

What are signs?

The following signs may indicate mental health problems, with a chance of dropping out.

Psychological

- The employee has **concentration problems**, excessive worrying, sleeps poorly, is tense, lethargic, loses focus, or losing perspective easily.
- The employee becomes increasingly **cynical** about the workload, work activities and finds it difficult to cope with changes. The employee is more often dissatisfied and **more quickly irritated** than usual, expressing that they no longer enjoy anything.

- Anxiety symptoms such as easily startled, **indeterminate feelings of fear**, trembling, anxiety or panic attacks, fear of being alone at home.

Physical

- The employee feels **tired**, appears dull and has lower productivity.
- The employee has increasing **physical symptoms**. Any doctor's visit does not help.
- The employee talks about complaints of **pain** with no apparent cause.
- Comes to work **under the influence** or with a hangover.

Performance

- Motivation and job happiness are diminished. The employee **no longer feels like** or is interested in **anything**.
- Signs in **behavior**, for example, lower functioning or lower productivity, less contact with colleagues, or dealing differently with customers.
- Employee asks for **task or hour reductions** or drops several activities in personal life, to keep up the work.
- The employee arrives late or calls in **sick** more often.

Checklist on signaling:

- Recognise the signs.
- Show that you are present for your employee. In a remote work environment, proactively reach out for additional contact.
- Find out how the employee views their situation.
- Trust your own instincts and verify your concerns with the employee.
- Avoid making assumptions about what is happening with the employee.
- Avoid filling in what is going on for your employee.

How do you address this? Actions to consider are:

- Show that you are there and be attentive. Observe facial expression, body posture, energy level, or avoidant behavior. It's essential to have enough flexibility in your schedule to stay connected with employees. When working remotely or from home, this is challenging, seek additional contact through a call or (lunch) walk.
- Reflect on your own beliefs and perceptions about mental health issues. We all have them, and that's normal. These beliefs influence your reactions as a supervisor. Trust your "gut feeling".
- Consider an employee's signals when evaluating the overall team dynamics. Such employees can sometimes act as early warning systems indicating potential structural issues.
- Share your concerns confidentially and seek advice from OHP or occupational physician.

Employee role:



Your employee has a responsibility to inform you as a supervisor as soon as mental health problems affect work. Your employee does not have to be open about causes of complaints or diagnoses. He does have to indicate what the consequences, if any, are for work and what he needs to stay at work.

Role of Occupational Health and Safety Service or HR department:

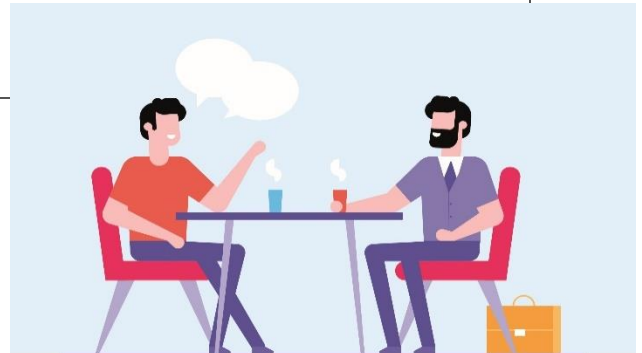
Provide expertise and support in to supervisors in learning how to recognize signs. They are available as a sounding board to help you think through concerns at an early stage.

2. Talk together about the impact of mental health problems at work

Reading Time: 6 minutes

In short:

- You or the employee can initiate this conversation. Prepare well. Such a conversation is difficult.
- Choose an appropriate time and place for a face-to-face talk, preferably somewhere else than the immediate work environment, a place that is comfortable and safe for the employee.
- Trust is an important prerequisite for this conversation. Avoid judgments.
- Listen attentively with an open (body) attitude, understanding and empathy.
- Specifically name and mirror what you observe in behavior and functioning. A supervisor may ask how someone is doing but may not ask about causes.
- Openness is beneficial to a certain extent, specifically to the point where an individual's issues impact their work. Ask about their concerns and what they need in order to continue working.
- Steps
 1. Prepare well
 2. Basic tips
 3. Share identified behaviors and functioning
 4. Impact at work
 5. Finding out bottlenecks
 6. Needs to stay at work
 7. Closing the conversation



You as a supervisor know this situation...

You've tried many times to have a good conversation, but you fall into your own "traps": you get emotional, or too strict, or the conversation gets stuck or awkward.

You find it challenging or difficult to start the conversation when you think mental health problems are the cause of changing behavior.

Why is this so important?

You are entering a conversation with your employee to discuss signs. This can be intimidating for your employee, as they may fear a poor evaluation or even dismissal. Research shows that most supervisors also find these conversations challenging and difficult. The manner in which this conversation is conducted is crucial for the outcome, as effective communication is essential. Pay close attention to which tips from this step-by-step guide are relevant to you.

Step-by-step plan for a good conversation.

1. Prepare well

Preferably, this conversation is conducted in a place other than the employee's immediate workplace, e.g., in an enclosed consulting room or during a walk. Prepare this conversation by:

- Have you prepared well? These are often difficult conversations.
 1. Know your own pitfalls
 2. Think in advance about possible causes from work
 3. Check absenteeism history

- 4. Check previous performance and career progression
- 5. Dwell on the work requested and delivered
- Choose a convenient time and place for a personal interview.

2. Basic tips:



- A foundational attitude of trust is essential for a productive conversation: giving attention and demonstrating empathy. **Make it clear:** I see you and I want to help you.
- **Listen twice as much as you speak:** "you have two ears and only one mouth." Just listening is supportive and gives a feeling that things *may* ease off for a while.
- **Take the signals you have observed seriously.** Ask open-ended questions. Occasionally drop a silence, and summarize what your employee has just said (if I understand correctly, you're saying that...). Let your body language reflect your engagement.
- **Recognize that openness is beneficial only up to a point,** specifically, until the issues begin to affect work performance. . Do not expect or force openness. If someone chooses to share, handle that information confidentially.
- **If you feel uncertain about conducting this conversation,** seek advice from the occupational health and safety professional or HR department.

3. Share identified behaviors and functioning

- **Show interest.** Emphasize that you want to know how your employee is doing.
- **Reflect and specify:** Clearly articulate the changes in behavior you've noticed in your employee.
- **Avoid probing for underlying causes or diagnoses:** Instead of asking about specific issues like depression, anxiety, stress, or burnout, focus on observable behaviors and performance.
- **Explore your employee's perspective:** Inquire if they recognize these signals or issues in themselves. Ask how they perceive their own situation and whether they acknowledge the changes you've observed.

Keep in mind

- Do:** Listen, summarize, ask further questions
- Don't** judge, give your opinion, and advice
- Do:** Always check and never assume
- Don't** assume for others
- Do:** think about someones qualities

4. Impact at work

- In this part of the conversation, focus on the expected work versus the work delivered. It's essential to maintain a balance between empathy and professionalism. When the work is well-suited to the person, it has positive effects on their health. Give your employee the opportunity to have a say about this.

5. Finding out bottlenecks

- During the conversation, you can ask what any bottlenecks are. Ask questions such as: what are your stressors? What makes you feel anxious or threatened right now?
- Discuss together who has influence over each bottleneck, as there are often both controllable and uncontrollable factors.

6. Needs to stay at work

- Emerging from the impact that mental health problems have on work, ask the question: What can your employee do in work and what are the limitations? Work can be used as "medicine," particularly the tasks or aspects that energize a person.
- Acknowledge that it's okay for them to be struggling temporarily. However, also ask: What steps can we take to prevent absenteeism or burnout? Keep asking questions, even if you feel inclined to jump straight to solutions. What does the employee need to keep working? What potential solutions are available? You both contribute ideas.

7. Closing the conversation

- **Make concrete (working) agreements about actions and follow-up steps.** Define everyone's roles in the process: What will you do as the supervisor, and what will the employee do? Encourage the employee to take responsibility and hold them accountable for their part. If professionals are involved, continue to monitor the situation closely.
- Evaluate a few days later how the conversation was received.
- Set communication guidelines together with the employee:
- *Between employee and supervisor:* how employee wants to be approached given the situation: does he benefit from extra attention? Experience shows that great caution is often not necessary but maintaining an atmosphere of safety and trust is essential.
- *To team:* Ask the employee what they would like you to communicate to the team. Generally, inform the team that the employee is facing challenges, but refrain from disclosing specific details about their situation.

Dilemma as a supervisor I often wonder whether my employee cannot perform or simply does not want to. Tip:

The more contact you have with your employee and the better you know them before any behavioral changes occur, the less this doubt will affect you. It's crucial to avoid explicitly expressing this doubt. Instead, focus closely on the observable behavior without assigning personal interpretations regarding the underlying causes (whether it's a matter of inability or unwillingness).

[Go back: Take action: 5 tools](#)

3. Encourage employee autonomy

Reading Time: 2 minutes

In short

- Autonomy contributes to health and job satisfaction, and increases the likelihood of Staying at work.
- Encourage your employee to assign tasks or seek solutions on their own.
- Encourage autonomy by coaching and responding to suggested solutions.

Why is this so important?

autonomy means having a say in how you organize work. When an employee experiences autonomy over their work, it contributes to occupational health and job retention. Employees with mental health problems find it at least as important to have their own direction. However, this can be more difficult due to reduced overview or difficulty making decisions.



How do you address this? Actions to consider are:

- **Empower employee** by not acting as a rescuer yourself. Especially when your employee is indecisive, uncertain or emotional about their situation, this is a common pitfall. It is important then to show understanding, acknowledge the perceived challenge and ask: what do you need?
- **Offer space.** Encouraging your employee to feel their own limits, to say no, and giving them space to make their own adjustments on a down day.
- **Encourage your employee to take steps privately as well.** This might include engaging a family doctor, psychologist, couples therapy or debt counsellor. This can be in addition to interventions at work.
- **Making choices together.** Collaborate to identify what is needed to facilitate Stay at Work. Focus on discovering where the employee's energy lies.
- **Assess Individual Insight:** Explore how well the employee understands their situation, as this influences their ability to take control. Employees often hesitate to take charge when facing challenges. As a supervisor, you can provide reassurance and guidance to help them navigate these situations. Examine yourself: Consider what lessons you can draw from this experience for your entire team.



Dilemma

When can my employee work it out on his own and when will I as a supervisor intervene? What to do if he is unable to pick it up himself?

Tip: as a supervisor, you can ask permission from the employee if you can take the lead a little more. To know what your employee particularly needs (perhaps a push or stay at home), the relationship with your employee is very important.

4. Find job accommodations to Stay at Work (SAW)

Reading Time: 6 minutes

In short

- Ask what employee *can* do. Work provides daily structure and connection.
- Intervene immediately and do not wait. Don't keep experimenting on your own for too long. Also commit to **short-term actions**, such as job accommodations, in addition to longer-term (such as treatment).
- Engage the right professional in time for further analysis or advice on adjustments to SAW.
- Explore together (temporary) job accommodations or control options in work content, tasks).
- Make clear working agreements, record them and communicate these back to the team.

You as a supervisor know this situation...

You have had a good conversation and are jointly looking for job accommodations but are unable to find a suitable solution.

You have been supporting an employee through conversations and adjusted working hours for some time. There is no improvement in how the employee feels. You are concerned and wonder what other support might be necessary.



Why is this so important?

Mental health-related absenteeism takes longer, is heavier, and more costly. To stay (connected)

at work, to a minimum even, is important to prevent detachment. On the other side; employees are at risk of disbalance and increasing symptoms when continuing work as it is. Often it is not only the psychological complaint itself. Other things also play a role: the content of the work, the workload or, for example, the limited personal control that your employee experiences. There is then a mismatch between the work and the capabilities of your employee. To maintain the balance and prevent absenteeism, you can check the work, - environment, relations and consider job accommodations.

Customized work accommodations checklist

- Ask the occupational health and safety professional to help think about options for work modifications in the particular work situation.
- Intervene immediately. Don't wait too long to decide on work adjustments together.
- Consider both short-term and long-term actions. Put short-term actions in the works as well so you don't waste time.
- Ask what employee can do to stay and thrive at work.
- Ask what modifications or opportunities employee sees for himself (content, tasks, work environment).
- Can't figure it out together? Get help in time for further analysis.
- Agree on the work, evaluation and communication to the team.



1. Your preparation

- **Be informed about suitable work.** And get advice from an OHP about the right balance between "energy consumers" and "energy sources". But also on the design of the workplace, and the work (sequence or quantity of tasks). Check out the services your organization offers through the HR department or Occupational Health and Safety Service.
- **Intervene immediately.** Give your employee some space and let them work on problems.
- **Always consider both short-term and long-term actions.** Sometimes what seems best to you is expensive or there are long waiting lists. Short-term action is therefore needed.



2. Searching together

- **Highlight your employee's qualities and growth.** Do this even when they are struggling. Compliment employees, even when they are not doing so well.
- **Explore what someone really cares about in work.** And look for his strengths and drives.
- **Use the "human scale".** Provide room for individual differences, but avoid exceptional positions.
- **Name the minimum work your employee must perform in** exchange for pay. And discuss when to call in sick.
- **Explore actions and job accommodations together.** Be creative and explore less common solutions as well. Give examples and be open to surprising ideas. You may ask what support, adjustment or provision someone needs to keep working.
- **Make sure that the content of the work remains at level.** When looking for job accommodations: change the quantity, not only the quality to more simple tasks only.
- **It is a dynamic process.** Look together at what works and what doesn't and admit when something doesn't work. Be honest about this.

Examples of control options and work modifications

- Ensure duo functions: then there is always someone else who can do some of the work.
- Offer low-stimulus work environment as an option, so that employee can choose where to perform related work best.
- Division of work: between colleagues but also between departments. For example: have employee work different/flexible hours, or alternate work.
- Relieve responsibility, task demands or difficulty.
- Temporarily doing less or different work.
- Have employee use a "pain day" or time out. Your employee then does not have to answer for calling in sick. If these days "run out," the next step will be to discuss the problem.

3. Making work agreements

- Make clear work agreements about made adjustments. What will each of you do?
- Agree with your employee how you will communicate about these agreements with immediate colleagues and the team.

4. Evaluation and follow-up

- Agree when you will evaluate the (temporary) job accommodations and how often. And who is responsible for initiating these interim evaluations, your employee or you?
- Be flexible: finding suitable work does not run a straight line, prepare for varying periods of symptoms and consult about necessary adjustments. Preferences may change; it is not a checklist.
- Regularly check in how your employee is doing, dare to keep the work open for discussion.

- Establishing adjustments and actions to stay mentally healthy at work is never "done". Therefore, there is no final evaluation. Stay in touch, even when things are improving.

5. Report

Write down agreements made. A plan to stay at work while struggling with mental health includes:

- (Work) Agreements on work adjustments.
- Set priorities and for each agreement: 1) Who does what? 2) When does it happen? 3) How and when will it be evaluated and reported on?

Privacy Act

Because of the privacy law (in Dutch AVG), reporting may be challenging. What was discussed, content wise, may not be recorded. As a supervisor, however, you may report what actions were taken, and what agreements were made. In a row, this looks like this:

- Note when you talked and who was present at conversation
- Don't report what was said, but report topics, actions, (work) agreements, evaluation plan.

Dilemma

"I think the imbalance is caused by my employee's private situation, but he doesn't take enough accountability in solving it. Or he doesn't accept help. What can I do then?"

- As a supervisor you have no control over private factors but you do have to deal with their consequences at work. It is then helpful to (temporarily) give some space in someone's work. It also helps if you know your employee well beforehand.
- Ask if any support is already present, and if not, help the employee find their way to support. Offer space to get help, e.g., that this can be done within working hours.
- Also talk about how the situation affects work, emphasizing your employee's responsibility to take action on private factors themselves.

5. Ask for support when you see a risk of sick leave

Reading Time: 4 minutes

In short

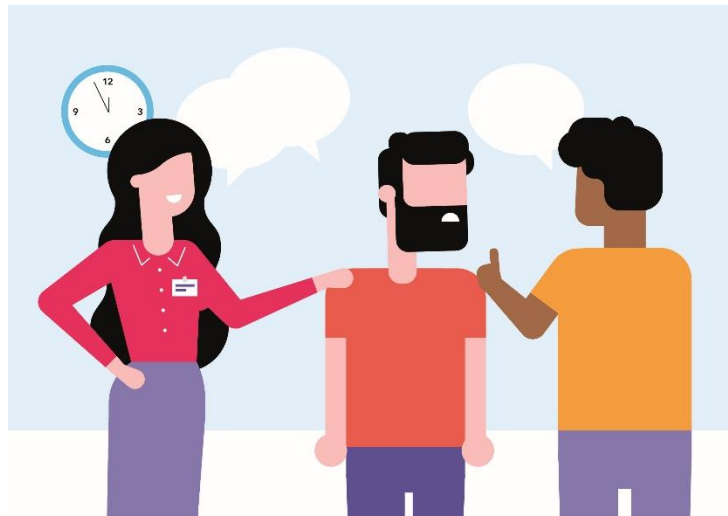
- Intervening before absenteeism occurs, and thus when absenteeism is imminent, shortens the duration of absenteeism.
- Stay in touch with your employee, even with reduced attendance.
- Show that you are there for your employee.
- The employee and supervisor are both responsible: health and safety professional advises.
- Shared sense of *urgency* is necessary for both to take action or change.

You as a supervisor know the situation...

Despite your support, your employee is regularly calling sick for a day or two. And you suspect dropout and long term absenteeism.

Why is getting support so important?

Mental health-related absenteeism lasts an average of 180 days and costs an average of 250-400 euros per day. If you intervene before absenteeism occurs, it really pays off. Often, with minor adjustments and the right support, an employee can continue working (partially). This is not only good for your organization but especially for the employee himself, facilitating to stay at work.



Basic tips for preventing absenteeism

- **Keep in touch in case of reduced attendance or short-term frequent absences.** Stay in touch with each other. The longer your employee and you as supervisor have no contact, the greater the distance becomes. And this makes the threshold even higher to reconnect. Agree together on how this connection will be made: at work, by phone or by email.
- **Don't wait and see.** Waiting won't make your employee better. The combination of seeking (professional) support quickly and stay to work (partially or modified) is the most effective.
- **Take responsibility together with your employee,** health and safety professionals advise and support when necessary. Sometimes you cannot prevent mental health-related absenteeism.
- **Don't just look at the last drop, the bucket was already full.** With risking absenteeism due to mental health problems, don't just look at the ultimate reason (drop) your employee is absent. The story behind it is at least as important.

Dilemma

How far do I go in giving advice? As a supervisor, I am not a healthcare provider.

Tip: Consider carefully where your own expertise lies and where internal or external support is needed. For example, from an occupational health professional or physician. Avoid acting as a caregiver instead of supervisor.

Counseling for short-term absences

- **When reporting sick, inform besides HR, also OHP or physician.**
Call in expertise as soon as possible. The OHP or occupational physician will advise the employee and you on what to do next. Keep in close contact the experts.
- **Consult with occupational health and safety professional in case of impending absenteeism**
Bring your concerns about employees at risk of absenteeism to a multidisciplinary social medical consultation. Who participates in this, differs for each team or organization e.g. the HR manager, company physician, OHP, supervisor, company social worker.
- This guideline does not focus on dealing with *long-term* mental health-related absenteeism. However, basic tips in each tool are also applicable while employees are absent and return to work.

When there is a (underlying) conflict:

- First try to work things out with your employee yourself, by starting the conversation within a few days of reporting sick. Is this not successful? Then quickly engage independent mediation and prevent further escalation through an OMH professional. It is important that this mediator is empathetic, practical and has knowledge of the specific work situation.
- Your conversation is about the reason for the conflict, the problems and the solutions (what cannot be done and what can be done). Keep the door open to adjusted work and reward someone performance.

Know your employee: five basic ingredients for a good working relationship

1. What does your employee find important in work

Reading Time: 1 minute

Why is this so important?

Also before your employee suffers from mental health problems, it is helpful to talk about what your employee finds important in their job. By doing so, you increase the chances that someone is in the right position in the right place.

How do you address this? Actions to consider are:



- **Finding out what your employee wants and can do in the long term.** And also by examining what someone is good at, what strengths they have and capitalizing on these at work.
- **Asking what your employee really values in work** (e.g., pursuit of ideals, salary, education). And with that, see if what someone finds meaningful is also in line with the tasks that person has, so that it is appropriate.
- **Ask when employee experiences pleasure and meaning in their work:** what are sources of energy (this is what energizes you, e.g. income, development opportunities, fun with colleagues), and what are "energy consumers" (this takes energy).

Need more tips on [signaling](#) and [good conversation](#)?

2. (Trustful) Relationship between employee and supervisor

Reading Time: 2 minutes

Why is this so important?

A good relationship, in which your employee trusts you as a supervisor, helps them to stay at work. There is then a greater chance that your employee will come to you when he is having a difficult time. Knowing each other well helps to recognize changing behavior in your employee. And also to know what an employee needs: a push or a step back.

How do you address this? Actions to consider are:



- **Be approachable, sincere, transparent.** By literally saying things like, "you know where to find me" or "come to me" and being physically present in the workplace. Show understanding and caring but also be businesslike when necessary. Every manager has his or her own style. Check how your employees perceive your style of leadership.
- **Be aware of your own beliefs and attitudes toward mental health.** Don't judge as soon as mental health symptoms are mentioned and take it seriously. Many people themselves see their mental health symptoms as posturing.
- **Regular (short) one-to-one conversation.** With each employee, the familiar "cup of coffee" is so important. When you observe your team members and speak regularly, observing changing behavior, you are already engaged in prevention.

- **Show appreciation for the work of *all* employees.** Even those who do less visible work. Give positive feedback and compliments.
- **Let non-work issues come up in performance appraisal as well.** This is a formal time for both employee and employer to be open about possible other issues that influence work.
- **Trust works two ways.** 1) Trust that you as a manager have in your employee, and 2) Trust from the employee in you as a manager. Your employee should feel that he is not immediately judged when he opens up (when something is no longer going on) and that he is not then immediately out on the street, for example.

Familiar dilemma as a supervisor

May the employee also approach me privately, if things really don't work out. How far should I go with being approachable? Tip: look especially at your own limits, and communicate them clearly. It is more important that your employee knows where he stands, than that you are available 24/7.

3. Attention to risk factors

Reading Time: 2 minutes

Why is this so important?

As a supervisor, it is important to know and recognize certain risk factors, leading to behavioral changes.

What are risk factors

Factors that can lead to mental health problems or an imbalance are:

- Being highly ambitious, perfectionist, loyal and dutiful.
- Overcompensation, for example, extra effort or suddenly always being present at activities. Or a person may actually withdraw when things get difficult.
- Reduced adaptability, e.g., in reorganization.
- Private factors may include: young family or child(ren) with additional concerns, life stage issues, marital problems/divorce, death, financial problems, informal care, menopause for women
- Factors at work: high workload combined with little self-control, conflict, trauma, bullying, aggression, violence or sexual harassment, discrimination, reorganization, (major) changes at work, poor or unclear schedules, staff shortages, a flexible contract or lack of clarity about contract

How do you address this? Actions to consider are:



- **Pay extra attention** to employees where one or more of the above factors are in play. Do this by discussing it. Keep an eye out for these more vulnerable employees.
- **Facilitate information, training or peer contact** about (the cause of) mental health and symptoms. Do this before someone becomes unbalanced.
- **Engage in courses**, such as mindfulness, personal effectiveness, time management or coaching with staff consultants.

To learn more about [signals](#) or [interventions and services](#).

4. Suitable work needs continuous attention

Reading Time: 2 minutes

Why is this so important?

Employees can continue to function well if there is a good match between the work and the person. We also call this "suitable work": does the work package (job difficulty, work package, work setting, responsibility) match the person's capabilities (level of education, competencies, qualities, stage of life, values and motivations). When you regularly review work and opportunities together, the chances of a possible imbalance are reduced.

How do you address this? Actions to consider are:



- **Honestly communicate to employee what you observe.** Also when in doubt about suitable position or the right match with the organization. Create clarity about career prospects, even if this is worrisome, e.g. no permanent contract or termination.
- **Emphasize to employees that they are responsible for their own careers.** Ask regularly if he is in the right place.
- **Ensure that you are sufficiently informed.** Especially of the content of your employees' work, in part to fairly assess execution and feasibility.
- **Drive growth and development.** Enhance in your employee what he is good at, rather than improving on lesser strengths.
- **Talk about suitable work and job happiness,** with all employees on a team, to avoid creating an imbalance. Make this a standard feature of periodic/annual performance reviews.

Want to know more about suitable work, even when mental health symptoms affect work: read about [job accommodations](#) and [interventions and services](#):

5. Interventions and services (internal or external).

Reading Time: 3 minutes

Why is this so important?

As a supervisor, you are the direct and often first reference for your employee. It is important that you are well informed about different types of interventions and services you can offer to your employee.

How do you tackle this?

- **Deploying the right intervention.** The trick is to assess when to deploy which intervention. Some interventions cost money and time and take longer, while change is needed in the short term. Deploy that, too, while employee waits.
- **Encourage employee to look for support and solutions themselves.** Consider coaching, courses and training from HRM and sustainable employability, such as career coaching.

An overview of interventions for the employee

We distinguish here between interventions aimed at improving:

- The working conditions and organization of work;
- The private circumstances;

Improvement of working conditions and organization of work

The employer takes the responsibility for these interventions. You have a lot of influence as a supervisor. You can consider the issues below at the team level and at the individual level. Give room for individual differences, but avoid unjust exceptional positions. Being transparent is important here.

Adjustments to work content/tasks:

- Are we taking measures that give employees more ownership of their work?
 - Can we: introduce flexible working hours/breaks, make changes in the workplace, involve employees in decision making, increase control options for intermittent employment?
- How do we improve education at work?
- How can we make the work more challenging or easier?
 - Can we create a learning work environment, increase training opportunities, change job content: by new tasks or just (temporarily) simplify?
- Is the pay still appropriate?
 - Salary, career prospects, personal appreciation
- Can we adjust the function (temporarily)?

Improvement of private circumstances

This type of intervention is focused on the employee himself. Therefore, the responsibility for this lies with the employee. As a supervisor, you may advise seeking help from:

- Mental health (staff) counselors
- General practitioner or practice assistant
- Psychologist
- Financial support/counseling

Strengthen your team and organization: five basic ingredients for "mentally healthy workplaces"

1. Team responsibility

Reading Time: 1 minute

Why is this so important?

For an employee experiencing mental health problems, it helps when the team shares collective responsibility. This creates a sense of support. There is then also a mutual safety net in a (temporary) period when someone is less taxable due to mental health problems.

How do you address this? Actions to consider are:



- **Express confidence in the team** by giving team itself a say in the work.
- **Ask yourself:** how is my team doing? How is the carrying capacity?
- **Drive shared responsibility** by holding colleagues jointly accountable for tasks and results.
- **Discuss team responsibilities** around mental health in team.
- **Reward team performance**, including when colleagues catch each other's eye.

Role of other stakeholders:



- Colleagues: provide space for things outside work, room for fun, show understanding to each other. Take responsibility with each other. Read here: [Social support among colleagues](#)
- Senior management: empowering teamwork. The supervisor is supported to make this theme central to team building.

2. Promote a safe working climate

Reading Time: 2 minutes

Why is this so important?

Promoting a socially safe working climate is important to provide employees with a sense of security and trust. An open, safe climate helps keep them working. Every colleague, including the supervisor, consciously or unconsciously contributes to a particular organisational culture.

Questions you can ask yourself



- Do I show understanding in conversation with my employee when it comes to mental health? Do I keep my own opinions to myself? In what ways do I myself contribute to a safe work environment and climate? Consider transparent communication, not gossiping, and protecting employees when necessary. Check that every employee (at risk for mental health problems) has a safety net at work.
- To what extent can employees be themselves? That employees can say what they want to say, under any circumstances.

How do you address this? Actions to consider are:



- **Show confidence** and space to be able to talk about mental health.
- **Encourage employees to talk to each other** about what stress, workload or anxiety is doing to them.
- **Speaking about your own vulnerabilities as a supervisor.** This is mirrored by employee. Your role model in this is visible to others.
- **Normalizing mental health**, "everyone goes through a difficult period somewhere in their life," "it's okay to be there," "how can I help you keep working?"
- **Inviting your employee to talk about vulnerability.** By doing so, as a supervisor, you take this out of the taboo. One way to do this is to send out information.

For tools, click on [Interventions and services \(internal or external\)](#)

3. Social support among colleagues

Reading Time: 1 minute

Why is this so important?

Social support is often experienced as a source of energy at work and motivation to keep working. If an employee is feeling mentally vulnerable, it can help to have both practical and emotional support offered by colleagues.

How do you address this? Actions to consider are:



- **Discuss within the team what role colleagues assume to** identify changing behavior or imbalance in each other. Also determine how this will be communicated in confidence to the employee concerned and his or her supervisor.
- **Observe whether each team member has at least one colleague** they get along with. And ask if anyone experiences this.
- **Being able to receive support is also an "art."** Practical support in the amount of work tasks helps quickly and well when an employee is struggling for a while.
- **Identify a "buddy" or "peer support system."** In which a colleague also has a role as a buddy to support your employee who is struggling. This could be a senior colleague, someone with lived experienced of mental health problems.
- **Encourage exchange between colleagues.** To name difficult tasks/situations in work and help each other. This increases perceived support and understanding.

Also see:

- [Team responsibility](#)
- [Promote a safe working climate](#)

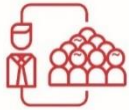
4. Mental health literacy

Reading Time: 1 minute

Why is this so important?

Mental health is part of everyone's well-being. Mental health problems often remain invisible for a long time and therefore require extra attention in a conversation. Yet they are often spoken about little or too late because of the taboo. Providing information and known the risks can be a way to reduce this.

How do you address this? Actions to consider are:



- **Initiate or facilitate** mental health education activities, ask for input from an employee who is experienced with it (experiencer) or the Occupational Health and Safety Service or HR department in your organization.
- **Self-refer information on mental health** and what are possible risk factors in the occupation or type of employees.

Role of other stakeholders:



- Senior management facilitates education on mental health, from HR, external organization or Occupational Health and Safety Service. This creates space for awareness and knowledge about mental health, risk factors and signs of imbalance.
- Senior management provides training and education for supervisors on supporting employees with mental health problems (such as this SAW-coaching intervention).

5. Vision on workload and occupational health and safety Act

Reading Time: 2 minutes

Why is this so important?

According to the Occupational Health and Safety Act, an employer is responsible for the health and safety of its employees. In the Netherlands, for example, this is reflected into a Working Conditions Act addressing: 1) work pressure, 2) undesirable behavior and sexual harassment, 3) aggression and violence including bullying, and 4) discrimination. All of these risks can cause and/or result in mental health problems. The employer must implement targeted policies in all four areas. Risk 1, work load, is briefly explained below because it has been mentioned frequently by employees with mental health problems.

What is workload



- Your employee cannot meet the qualitative and quantitative demands. This may be due to pace, time pressure, or (insufficient) knowledge or skills. But also due to the lack of work and rest periods.
- Work pressure, combined with reduced autonomy in their work, can exacerbate psychological symptoms. This reduces employee functioning.

How do you address this? Actions to consider are:



- **Identify, acknowledge and take workload seriously.** Especially if it is long lasting and not temporary. And if it is accompanied by conflict or other stressors.
- **Address causes of workload.** In consultation with (senior) management. Employees with psychological complaints are often the “canaries in the coal mine”, the warning entities that something may be structurally wrong in the workplace. OPH can advise.
- Alert to loss of control or functioning problems.
- Attend trainings on leadership or absence management.

For tools, click on: [Interventions and services](#)

How was this guideline developed?

This guideline has been developed on the basis of evidence-based and applied research. The authors are affiliated with Tranzo at Tilburg University and with the research group Labour expertise, at HAN University of applied sciences. This research group aims to increase labour expertise knowledge through applied research.

The guideline is based on the following data sources: extensive systematic literature review, information from occupational health and safety professionals, including labor experts, occupational and organizational experts, occupational physicians, occupational psychologists and HR professionals, and finally information from employees with mental health problems and their supervisors.

COVID-19 pandemic and working from home: this guideline was developed during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands, when the government advised working from home as much as possible. For some employees, remote work is mentally challenging, while for others, it's a relief. What became evident is that mental health suddenly became a more open topic of discussion. This shift influenced the recommendations provided in this guideline. Since there is still not enough evidence on the long-term effects of mandatory remote work, the core of the guideline is designed to apply to all work environments, whether employees are working from home or on-site.

The development of the guideline was funded by Institute GAK. [Institute Gak | Social projects and scientific research](#)

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June 2022, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.