

**How  
are  
you?**



# Mental health in the workplace

A brochure for employees



# What is the connection between work and the mind?

**“And what do you do?” is a question that people are quick to ask when they meet you. This shows how important work is in our society.**

## **Why work is so important.**

Work is part of our identity. It secures our livelihood and structures our lives. Work puts us in contact with other people, thereby meeting a part of our social need for community and acceptance. It offers us activity and, in a best-case scenario, development opportunities. These are all things that are important for our mental health. We know that work generally has a positive influence on our mental health. However, work can also overburden us and, in the worst case, can make us ill.

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## **The world of work demands more and more of us.**

Modern work life is complex, packed with information and frequently requires quick decisions. Rapid results, flexible solutions and good client relations are required. Above all, this requires mental and emotional work – i.e. psychological skills. For this reason, the mind has become our Achilles heel in the modern world of work. Work can put our mental health at risk in two ways: Either the demands and working conditions themselves can be so unfavourable that they significantly contribute to the deterioration of our mental health. Or we are under psychological stress for other reasons and notice that our performance in the workplace is impaired. This in turn leads to additional stress, as performance is paramount in our society.

## **Talking about it helps.**

Some problems resolve themselves over time. This can also be the case for more minor mental health issues. However, we should not rely on this because if we do nothing, these issues can also get worse. It is better to speak openly about things, because then we can seek solutions. If we do not talk about our problems or they are not addressed, we will also be left to deal with the stress and fear alone. This in turn worsens the situation. It is therefore important to talk about mental health issues and illnesses. Mental health issues, in particular, are often associated with



fear. How will those around me react? My superiors? My colleagues, who may have to stand in for me? Will I lose my job?

**Take the first step.**

Most people around us can sense when something has not been right for a long time. It may be that nobody talks to us about it because it is not something concrete. Maybe we ourselves don't know the right words to say. A simple, sincere and caring "How are you?" is a good starting point. Make sure there is time to then listen or talk. You can find further ways to start a conversation on the website [www.how-are-you.ch](http://www.how-are-you.ch)



# A work environment that is good for mental health

There are several factors that determine how good our work environment is for our mental health. We can influence many of these. For ourselves but also for our work colleagues. A brief overview.

## **Do not allow discrimination.**

Unfortunately, stigmatisation and discrimination against people with mental health issues is still a frequent occurrence. Mental health issues are generally taboo in our society. How do people talk about the burnout of the accountant in your organisation? Are remarks tolerated? Was relief provided? Does your superiors talk about their own stress, for instance when they are faced with deadlines?

Whether or not the superiors in your company talk openly and non-judgementally about mental illness and mental health issues will also determine whether or not you have the courage to do this.

## **It is a question of corporate culture.**

4 Trust, honesty, tolerance and fairness: If your organisation not only pays lip service to these four values but actually practices them, then you can tackle your duties with a feeling of security. If not, then it is normal to feel insecure. This in turn uses energy, we become tired and our concentration and efficiency suffer.

You yourself can contribute to the four values mentioned above. The same applies to friendliness, respect and appreciation. For example, make a habit of commenting on positive things you notice. A sincere compliment will be appreciated not only by your colleagues but also by your superiors.

## **Your personal work situation.**

You are sure to know people who were constantly rubbing someone up the wrong way in one job but who got along perfectly in another. The right fit is key. By this we mean: How do I, as a person with my abilities and my interpersonal skills, fit into my workplace, into my team and with my superiors?

Fitting in is an important factor for mental health. How do you feel about this? Do not demand the impossible of yourself. Nobody can fit in and adapt everywhere. Now and then we all rub someone up the wrong way. If you have never truly felt comfortable in your job and you have been unable to improve things, then you should think about whether it may be worth changing jobs.

### **Adequately challenging and engaging.**

We like to be challenged and supported. You should therefore ask regular questions about your prospects and development opportunities. Make your own specific suggestions. Is nothing working? Then look for an appropriate leisure activity.

It is also good for your mind if you are involved in a task. If we feel our work has a purpose and we are motivated, we approach our tasks with a spring in our step. If this motivation is missing, you should take this seriously and consider whether another task would make you happier.

### **Set priorities and achieve a balance.**

How can you prevent your workload from continually increasing? Setting priorities is important. Agree your duties and objectives with your superiors. This allows you to focus your energy where it is actually important. If you are given another assignment, ask what can be taken away in return.

Can you say no? Can you deal with not doing things 100% perfectly? If not, learn to. Start with small steps and see if the reactions are actually as bad as you feared. Make sure you balance other areas of your life, such as leisure activities, family and friends. Old-fashioned leisure activities are at odds with our focus on efficiency. Yet regular downtime, which can by all means include boredom and daydreaming, is great for energising your brain and mind. The same is true of getting enough sleep.

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**How  
are  
you?**

**Weekend.**  
**Wage negotiations.**  
**Burnout.**

**We talk about  
mental health too.**

# Is stress harmful? Not necessarily

We are absolutely cut out to manage acutely stressful situations. However, chronic stress, i.e. stress over long periods, jeopardises our physical and mental health.

## Why is chronic stress so dangerous?

In stressful situations, your body releases a cocktail of hormones and neurotransmitters, which mobilises our energy in the short term and allows us to cope with the current event. Once the stress is over, the substances in our body return to their normal level.

Chronic stress brings this regulation mechanism to a standstill. This makes us vulnerable to physical and mental illnesses, such as depression, dementia, high blood pressure or back pain.

## Relaxation recharges your batteries.

Reducing stress is therefore important. Make active relaxation a priority. Instead of lounging on the sofa and turning on the TV, go for a swim in the sea, for a walk, to a yoga class or make a chair. It takes a little effort, but afterwards your mental fatigue will disappear, and you will feel refreshed again.

- 6 Tip: Learn a tried and tested relaxation method (e.g. progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training or meditation). Practice it so that over time the body and mind “know” how to reach a relaxed state quickly.

## Do some mental flexibility training...

Our thoughts influence our stress levels. Try to challenge stressful thoughts and reassess stressful situations. An example: You are stressed by your superior's regular fits of temper. Yet your colleague does not seem to be affected. How does your colleague see the situation? Also take note of how you think about yourself. There is a huge difference between thinking “I am a failure” and thinking “For a moment just now, I thought I was a failure”.

## ...and what else helps.

Social interactions, friends, spirituality, sufficient sleep and a balanced diet also increase our resistance to stress. The same applies if you have a sense of purpose, which can be achieved, for example, through volunteering.

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## Stress and me: [www.stressnostress.ch](http://www.stressnostress.ch) (in German, French and Italian)

The stressnostress website describes five steps you can take to combat stress:  
[www.stressnostress.ch](http://www.stressnostress.ch) > *ich-und-stress*

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# Early warning signs of exhaustion

The term “burnout” is becoming more widely used – and rightly so. It is associated with less stigma than “depression” and may therefore act as a gateway to greater acceptance of mental illness in general.

## **Who is particularly at risk?**

People more at risk are those with above-average commitment, who overexert themselves at work and have high expectations of themselves. Now commitment is a good thing as long as you respect your own limits. But if you regularly commit more than your energy reserves allow, this can lead to short-term or long-term exhaustion.

## **Warning signs: time to act.**

The sooner you react to the warning signs, the more likely you are to be able to stop a downward spiral. If you notice several of the following signs in yourself over a long period of time, it's time to seek support. This support can come from a superior, HR manager, GP or a psychiatric or psychological specialist.

- You are no longer able to “switch off” in your free time.
- You are working more and more because you need longer to finish your tasks.
- You are neglecting friends, family and hobbies in favour of work or because you are simply too exhausted to go out in company.
- You often feel completely exhausted.
- Your concentration is suffering and you are more forgetful than usual.
- You constantly feel overwhelmed.
- You are nervous, irritable and sensitive. You get angry over little things you would normally take in your stride.
- You are sleeping badly and you can't switch off at night.
- You feel physically shattered.
- You are consuming more substances designed to keep you alert and active or to help you sleep.

# Recognising mental health issues

One thing that should be made clear is that the phrase “once ill, always ill” does not apply to mental illness. Mental illnesses are treatable. And treatment is more effective the earlier it starts. It is therefore important to get specialist support at an early stage.

**There are no clear boundaries between healthy and ill.**

We are not either healthy or ill – there are no clear boundaries. There are many stages between complete health and sick leave with varying effects on performance.

**Mental illness? That can't happen to me.**

Actually, it can! Although there are factors that increase or decrease the risk, we have no control over our mental health. Just as little as we do when it comes to physical illnesses. The fact is that one in two people in Switzerland will become mentally ill during their lifetime. One in four people will experience impaired performance as a result of a mental illness. And it can affect each and every one of us. The most common remark by people with a mental illness is: “I never thought that it could happen to me.” We fear mental illness because it can affect anyone, and it is still a taboo subject.

- 8 For this reason, it is so important that we are aware of mental illness and that we talk about things, not only privately, but also at work.



How  
are  
you?

**Car.  
Overtime.  
Insomnia.**

**We talk about  
mental health too.**

### **Mental health issues? Who do I turn to?**

First discuss your suspicion with your family, a friend or someone else you are important to and who will ask how you are doing in the future. You can find out how best to start this conversation at [www.how-are-you.ch](http://www.how-are-you.ch)

If your work is affected because you are exhausted and irritable, and are often getting into conflicts, for example, then the question arises as to whether you should speak to your superiors or HR manager. This is not an easy decision to make. Questions that might help you make this decision include: Do people talk openly about mental health in your organisation? How is your relationship with these people? What response do you expect?

### **Test your superiors' attitude.**

Are you unable to gauge how your boss will react to your health complaints? Start with a test where you think about possible explanations out loud: "I have noticed recently that I have often been exhausted. Some days I have energy and on other days I can barely make it to the afternoon. I have already considered whether I am so tired because of my eyes and need new glasses. One of my friends wasn't getting enough iron and was always exhausted. Or perhaps it is a mental health issue."

Your superiors' reactions will reveal their attitudes towards mental health issues. If their tone of voice, facial expressions and response are non-judgemental and perhaps even supportive, then a deeper discussion may be possible.

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### **And what next? There are two variants:**

#### **A)**

You have decided not to mention the issue to your superiors because you fear discrimination. Go to your GP or seek support from a psychiatrist or psychologist. Get additional advice on employment law if you feel discriminated and fear you may lose your job (see the reverse for advisory services).

#### **B)**

You know that you will be supported in your organisation and you have described your situation to the relevant people. You may also already be able to tell them that you are undergoing treatment. This shows that you have taken responsibility for your health. This gives an important signal.

# You have a mental illness – now what?

What to do if you realise you are not well. The slump in your performance has lasted a long time and can no longer be overlooked. You need help.

## **Where to get help.**

If you have a GP that you trust, he or she should be your first port of call. He or she can also undertake all the necessary tests to rule out any physical cause for your condition. If required, you will be referred to a psychiatrist or psychologist for treatment. If you would like to find a qualified specialist yourself you can find useful addresses and services on the website [www.how-are-you.ch](http://www.how-are-you.ch).

## **The DI office can also help.**

If you have been on sick leave for more than 30 days or have had an increasing number of shorter absences over a longer period of time, you can make an early detection declaration with the DI. This early detection declaration does not constitute an application for a DI pension. Within the context of the early detection, the DI office assesses whether there are support options that will allow you to continue working in the long term and, if so, what these options are.

## **Sick leave as a core issue.**

Within the context of treatment, the question of your ability to work will also arise. A performance-related sick note is a new tool, which allows you to continue to work. For example, you reduce your workload from 100% to 60% due to illness. However, within this 60%, you only need to work at 50% of your usual output. The important thing here is that your job description is adapted so that stress is actually reduced as well. If you think this might be useful, speak to your superior about this or get support from your GP.

Seek advice if you are not sure how best to proceed. You can find advisory services on the last page.



# If a team colleague is not well

You can help to ensure that mental illness is dealt with in the same way as any physical illness.

## Here are two examples.

Your colleague often sits and stares blankly at his desk. If you talk to him, you have to repeat yourself every time. Even though he has a lot to do, he seems to be idle. You haven't seen him like this before.

Your co-worker has called in sick several times on a daily basis over the past few weeks with various reasons that nobody believes are true. When she is at work, she has dark circles under her eyes and seems a little edgy. Something has definitely changed in her.

## Take the first step.

If you experience something like this, take into consideration that they may be suffering from a mental health issue. Other colleagues may share the same opinion. However, avoid talking about the person concerned behind their back. In contrast, conversations and offers of support are helpful.

## How to conduct the conversation.

For example, you could start with "I get the impression that you haven't been doing so well recently. Would you like to talk about it? We could grab a coffee now or after work." Your sympathetic ear is valuable and can make someone feel less alone; a feeling that most people with mental health issues experience. Remember that you are not responsible for resolving your colleague's or your employee's problem. It is great if you listen to them sympathetically and let them know that you understand. Do not give any unsolicited advice. Judgemental statements like "you are such a pessimist" or poor consolation like "you'll be okay" are unhelpful and can increase their feeling of isolation. You can find further conversation tips on [www.how-are-you.ch](http://www.how-are-you.ch)

## For managers

Employers are legally obliged to care for the physical and mental health of their employees. Managers play an important role at all levels in this respect. You can find guidance on how you can contribute to mental health as a manager in your organisation at [www.how-are-you.ch](http://www.how-are-you.ch)

## More information at [www.how-are-you.ch](http://www.how-are-you.ch)

- Conversation tips for employees, persons affected and people close to them
- Suggestions for mental health care
- Adresses and services available
- Information about the “How are you?” campaign

## Advisory services

Pro Mente Sana offers specialist, confidential advice if you want to know how and whether to address mental health issues in the workplace or if you have legal or insurance-related questions:

Pro Mente Sana advice line: Tel. 0848 800 858 (in German; standard charge); see also [www.promentesana.ch](http://www.promentesana.ch)

You can also get advice from your regional DI office. The DI office is a rehabilitation insurance provider. Early detection can help to keep you in work. You can find the relevant addresses at [www.ahv-iv.ch/en](http://www.ahv-iv.ch/en) > *Contacts* > *DI offices*

**In an emergency** you can also call the advice line of Die Dargebotene Hand / La Main Tendue: Tel. 143 (24/7, free of charge, anonymous, in German, French or Italian).

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## Order or download brochures

At [www.how-are-you.ch](http://www.how-are-you.ch) > *More about the campaign* > *Order brochures* you can order or download further copies of this brochure, a guide for managers, a general brochure on mental health and illnesses, a brochure on mental health and illnesses in the family and a brochure containing tips on how to conduct talks.

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Campaign partners:

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On behalf of:

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