

Guideline for the prevention of work-related stress



1. Background and purpose

The University of Copenhagen has an [Occupational Health and Safety policy](#), which aims to be the inspiration for establishing creative and attractive environments where employees experience workplaces that are characterised by supporting talent, openness, respect, community and inclusion and where students are met by an inspiring study environment.

UCPH wants to foster a working environment with mutual respect among managers and employees and recognition of the employees' contribution in the exercise of the different work functions at the university. This partly involves ensuring that the individual employee has the opportunity to use their skills, has influence on and co-responsibility for the way in which their own work is organised, and has good opportunities for personal and professional development. Work-related stress reduces the well-being of the individual and in the workplace as a whole, and therefore often leads to a declining work performance in the long term. It has a negative effect on motivation and commitment among employees and leads to increased absence from work. Therefore, managers and employees must work together to prevent work-related stress.

2. What is stress?

Stress is the body's reaction to overload, either physical or mental. Stress is the body's attempt to survive that overload. Together with the nervous system, hormones and the immune system work to compensate for the damage caused by the overload.

When you are stressed, you feel demotivated and experience an imbalance between demands and resources. For example, stress can be caused by unclear roles, changes, conflicts, excessive workload, lack of predictability and priorities, but also private life and personality play an important role when trying to identify the sources of stress. Stress can manifest itself in a number of physical, psychological and behavioural symptoms.

A distinction is made between short-term and long-term stress. Short-term stress may occur when you get into a demanding situation which puts the body on alert for a short period of time, for example when you are faced with a particularly difficult task. When the situation is over, the body relaxes. Short-term stress is normal and beneficial as it increases our ability to perform in a given situation. Long-term stress occurs when the stressful situations do not disappear. The body then remains on heightened alert for weeks, months or years, and it cannot tolerate this. [Read more in UCPH's toolkit about stress on KUnet.](#)

3. Managing work-related stress

Preventing long-term stress is about being aware of the balance between workload and resources – both at the workplace as a whole and for the individual employee. Here, the management has a special responsibility. It is not always possible to remove the demands of the workplace, but the management can influence the amount of pressure the demands entail and they can help strengthening the resources that employees have to solve the tasks. If instances of stress do occur, they should be dealt with quickly and preferably at the level where they occurred. When implementing measures to prevent and eliminate stress, etc., UCPH should consider the perspectives of the organisation, management, colleagues and individual member of staff.

3.1 The organisation's responsibility

The organisation, in this case primarily the faculty and department management as well as heads of administrative units, has a major impact on the prevention of stress, among other things by creating a work environment that promotes well-being. The signals given by the manager are highly important. It is important that the entire management team has understood and accepted the importance of creating a sustainable effort to tackle work-related stress for all employees.

3.2 The line manager's responsibility

The line manager is responsible for preventing work-related stress by ensuring that the work is well planned and organised so that the workload matches the staff's time, skills and resources. The manager should also be aware of the importance of giving employees constructive feedback and acknowledging their efforts. It is a good idea to create a common language about stress in the unit, partly to be more precise about what stress is, and partly to create confidence that the manager is ready to handle specific cases of stress. In specific cases of stress, it is a good idea to examine whether the situation can be an expression of working conditions that go deeper than the specific case.

The manager must be familiar with the existing opportunities for the employee to get help and support, for example through the University's psychological counselling service. The manager must also be aware that a single employee's stress may have a bearing on well-being in the entire employee group. [Read more about what the line manager can do.](#)

3.3 Colleagues' responsibility

Staff must show consideration and respect for each other and provide collegial support. [Read more about what colleagues can do.](#)

3.4 The individual employee's responsibility

The individual employee is responsible for planning and organising their work in dialogue with their line manager to ensure overview and appropriate prioritisation of tasks. To avoid stress, the individual employee should have a clear understanding of their own role and responsibilities. If there is an imbalance between the employee's tasks and their time, skills and resources, the employee should discuss this with the manager before the problem escalates. [Read more about what the individual employee can do.](#)

4. Necessary resources

The necessary human and financial resources should be set aside for preventing and handling stress.

5. The tasks of OHS committees and collaboration committees regarding the psychological working environment

OHS committees and collaboration committees both have a number of tasks in connection with the psychological working environment, including stress. The committees in the individual unit must agree on a division of labour in this area. This should be done at least once a year, for example at joint meetings of the committees.

5.1 The role of the OHS committee

[In accordance with the Danish working environment legislation](#), the occupational health and safety committees have the following tasks in relation to ensuring a healthy psychological working environment:

The OHS committee must review the company's health and safety activities in relation to ensuring a healthy psychological working environment. The OHS committee's main function is to contribute to creating the framework for a good psychological working environment at UCPH. The OHS committee advises the management on issues concerning the psychological working environment. The OHS committee must have an annual working-environment discussion in which, among other things, it sets targets for the work on the psychological working environment in the coming year.

5.2 The role of the collaboration committee

In [accordance with the 2013 Agreement regarding Cooperation and Joint Consultation Committees in the State](#) (in Danish), the collaboration committee has the following tasks in relation to ensuring a healthy psychological working environment:

The collaboration committee plays a central role in making sure that the workplace has a good psychological working environment which is characterised by trust and cooperation and which helps to provide room for professionalism and quality in the performance of tasks. In this connection, the committee may discuss well-being and the psychological working environment, as well as the work/life balance.

The committee must discuss the workplace's efforts to identify, prevent and handle problems in connection with work-related stress and can develop guidelines for the area.

6. Termination and validity

The guidelines take effect on adoption by the General Collaboration Committee.

Termination must comply with the rules in the collaboration committee circular according to which either of the parties may give three months' notice of termination of the guidelines. Before termination, the collaboration committee is to endeavour to amend the existing guidelines to make them satisfactory for the parties in the collaboration committee.

The guideline replaces the previous Guideline for the psychological workplace environment, including bullying, harassment and stress.

Processed and adopted at the HSU meeting held on 25 June 2018.

Henrik C. Wegener
Rector

Ingrid Kryhmand
Deputy Chair of HSU