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# Recognising and managing mental illness

Guidelines for managers and human resource managers



With these guidelines, elipsLife wants to support managers in recognising employees' mental illness and give advice on how to behave in such circumstances.

**Why does it matter?**

Absences due to mental illness have more than doubled in the last 20 years. In addition, the duration is longer than for other illnesses. The time factor plays a central role in mental illness: the earlier a person affected receives support, the higher the probability of maintaining or restoring their ability to work.

**Purpose of these guidelines**

The guidelines show managers possibilities and limits in their responsibility as managers when it comes to mental illness.

**Structure of the guidelines**

The theoretical part of the guidelines provides background knowledge on mental illness, its frequency and its effects. The practical part consists of conversation guidelines and two practical examples.



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# Preface

**Statistics show that more people are affected by mental illness than generally is assumed. Stress at the workplace is not the only reason for such illnesses.**

**Although the number of people affected by mental illness and related absences due to illness have increased in recent years, there is a great deal of uncertainty on how to deal with this in professional and private life. Managers often ask themselves questions like: Do I address my observation? If so, how? When do I have to take action? How? Do I show understanding or do I distance myself?**

Mental stress is not always recognisable to outsiders. There are people who continue to work normally for a long time and then, seemingly out of the blue, are unable to work because of a mental illness. In general, however, it is very important to be attentive.

It is part of every manager's duty to recognise warning signs in time and to react adequately. It is not their job to act as psychologists, therapists or coaches. If a manager is attentive toward their employees - especially in the case of mental disorders - this is usually perceived positively by their employees. Experiencing this kind of leadership motivates employees. They are more productive and their emotional attachment to the company increases. This is reflected, for example, in fewer absences, lower fluctuation and increased work performance.

The extent to which a mental illness leads to a restriction of professional performance or even to an inability to work depends on the severity of the illness. Severe suffering and a considerable impairment of the quality of life can have effects on the ability to work. The trigger for a mental illness is usually a stressful situation such as a divorce or conflicts at work in the long term. Permanent stress can also contribute to the development of a mental illness.

The experience of stress varies from person to person. Something that stresses one person can be an interesting challenge for another. Work atmosphere and work organisation play a major role in whether employees feel motivated and challenged or stressed. Things that happen in a person's private life can also cause stress.

Managers are responsible for  
recognising warning signs  
and taking action

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# 01.

● Theory



## Which illnesses can lead to occupational disability?

The figures speak for themselves: 29% of the working population in Switzerland feel exhausted, 30% have more stress than resources. 48% of disability pensions are the result of mental disorders - and according to a health study by Health Promotion Switzerland and their Job Stress Index 2020, the phenomenon of stress is costing employers around CHF 7.6 billion per year.

Stress and psychosocial risks at work are steadily increasing, leading to an increased risk of burnout

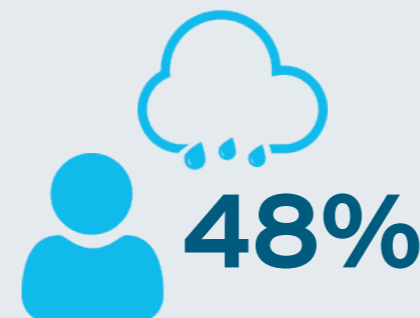
**29%**

**of the employed feel exhausted**



**30%**

**of the employed have more strains than resources**



**48%**

**of disability pensions are the result of mental illnesses**

**CHF 7,6 billion**

**Stress costs employers in Switzerland CHF 7.6 billion per year**

# How do employee absences due to illness impact a company?

In 2019, the average rate of illness-related absences (due to illness and accidents) was 3.2%.

This means that more than 3 out of every 100 employees are permanently absent from work, resulting in costs related to absences of about 9% of total salaries. Further surveys have shown that the indirect costs are even two to three times higher than the direct costs.

Increased absences may also lead to declining team and client satisfaction, as well as having a negative impact on the company's image.



Continued remuneration for missing workforce



Extra workload for colleagues



Declining productivity



Quality and delivery bottlenecks



Overtime



Recruitment costs



Loss of value added



Presenteeism



Temporary staff

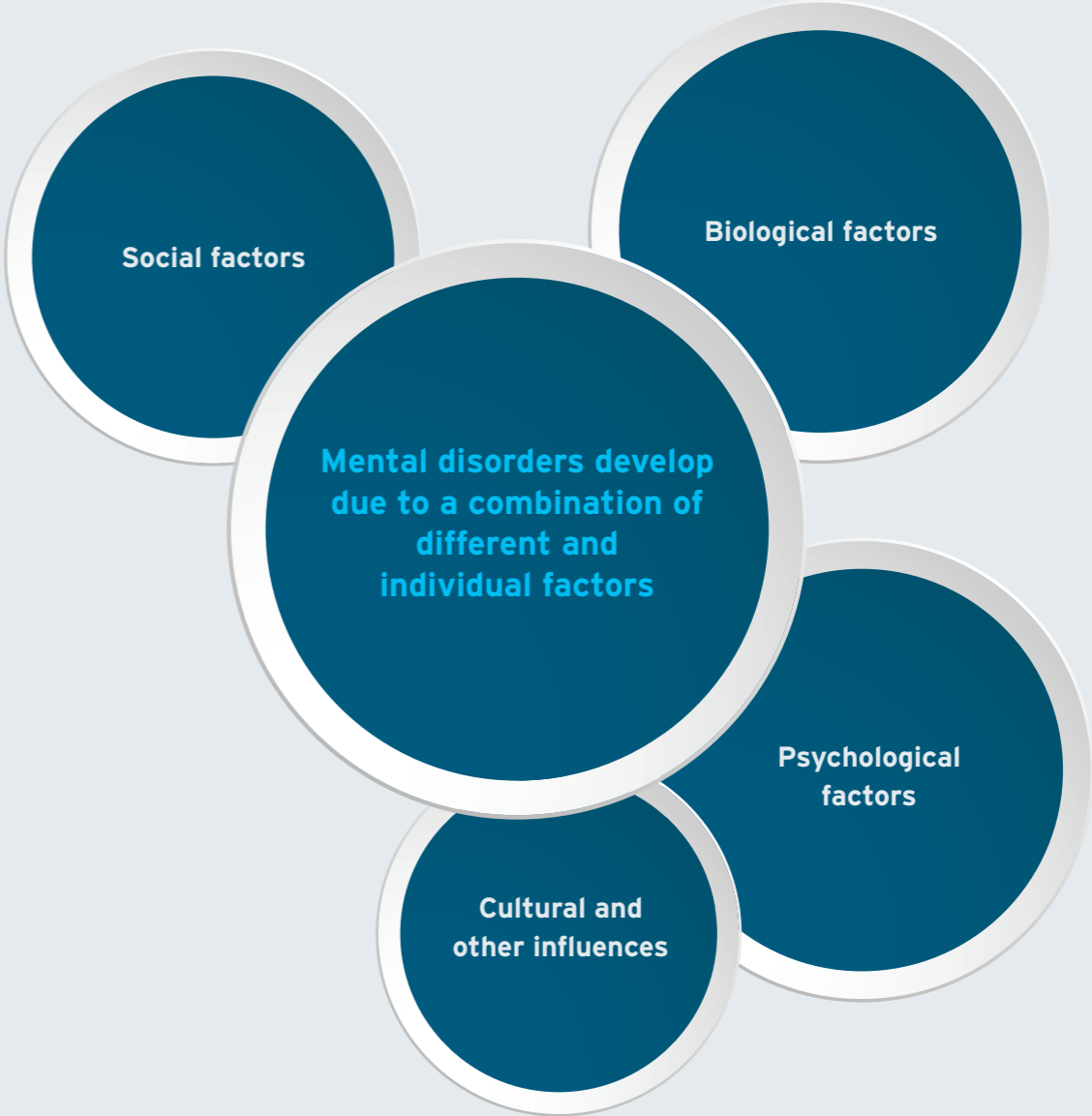
# How do mental illnesses develop?

**Mental illnesses arise from a combination of individual factors.**

Biological factors (e.g. predispositions), psychological influences (e.g. self-confidence, trauma) and social aspects (e.g. social network, work situation) all play a role, as do. There are also cultural and other influences (e.g. job insecurity).

**Long-term stress can also contribute to mental illness**

In principle, the incidence of mental illness is independent of age, origin, gender and education. However, some disorders occur more often in younger people (e.g. eating disorders such as anorexia), others more often in men than in women (e.g. alcohol dependency) - and vice versa.





# What is stress - and when does it make you ill?

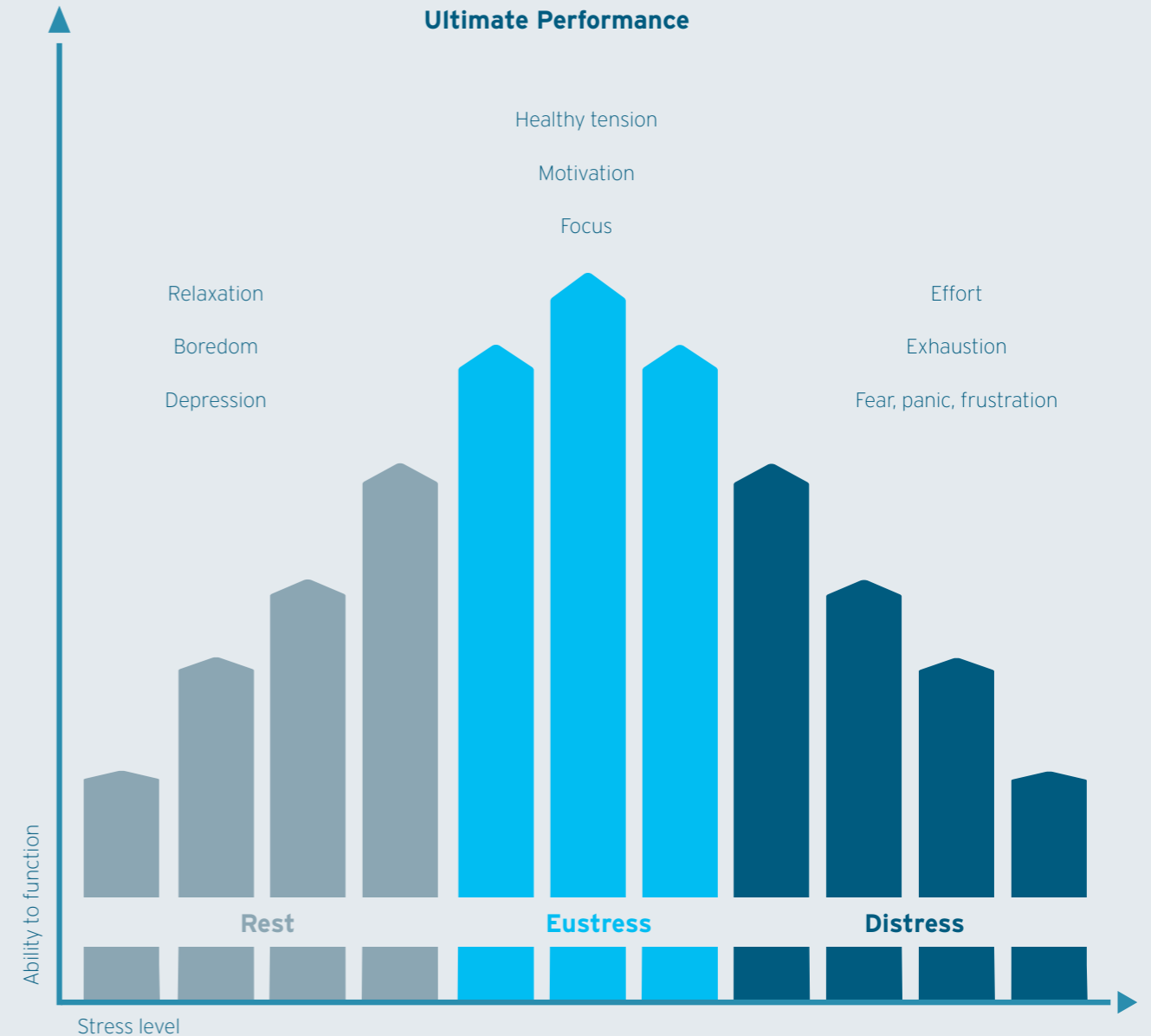
Stress is an expression of strain and tension and can certainly have a positive effect. Short-term stress (eustress) can be activating. However, if new stress stimuli are constantly being added or the pressure continues without recovery phases, the body switches to permanent alarm (distress).

**People who feel stressed often are more prone to physical and mental illnesses.**

The health consequences can be manifold (e.g. tension, headaches, tinnitus, hearing loss, stomach problems, concentration problems, sleep disorders). Stress at the workplace does not always trigger (physical) complaints. But it can make them worse if it is a permanent condition.

**Taking countermeasures at an early stage is of particular importance.**

Early countermeasures can include: sufficient exercise, relaxation exercises, maintaining social contacts and reading. Initial psychological counselling can also be helpful.



## What are the warning signs of mental illness?

Long-term mental stress can lead to a mental illness that requires treatment. To avoid this, it is important to recognise warning signs in time and to react adequately.

Possible warning signs are an increase in absences, difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, unreliability, an increased in the error rate, irritability or disinterest. It is difficult for managers to recognise whether a person is mentally stressed. A suspicion is always based on the interpretation of personal observations. Recognising warning signs is also made more difficult by the fact that fixed working hours and places of work are becoming increasingly rare.

Behavioural changes do not necessarily have to be the result of a mental disorder or mental stress. Other causes such as family stress (relatives needing care, child care, etc.) or physical complaints (back pain, etc.) can also explain the changed behaviour.

If a change in behaviour is observed, the manager should talk to the person concerned - if possible in person and only if this is not possible by telephone/video telephony. It is the manager's task to support the person concerned and to point out ways to help. It is not their task to solve the problems.

Recognise, don't interpret - support instead of solving problems



Increasing absences



Difficulty concentrating



Forgetfulness



Increasing error rate



Irritability



Unreliability



Change of appearance



Demotivation



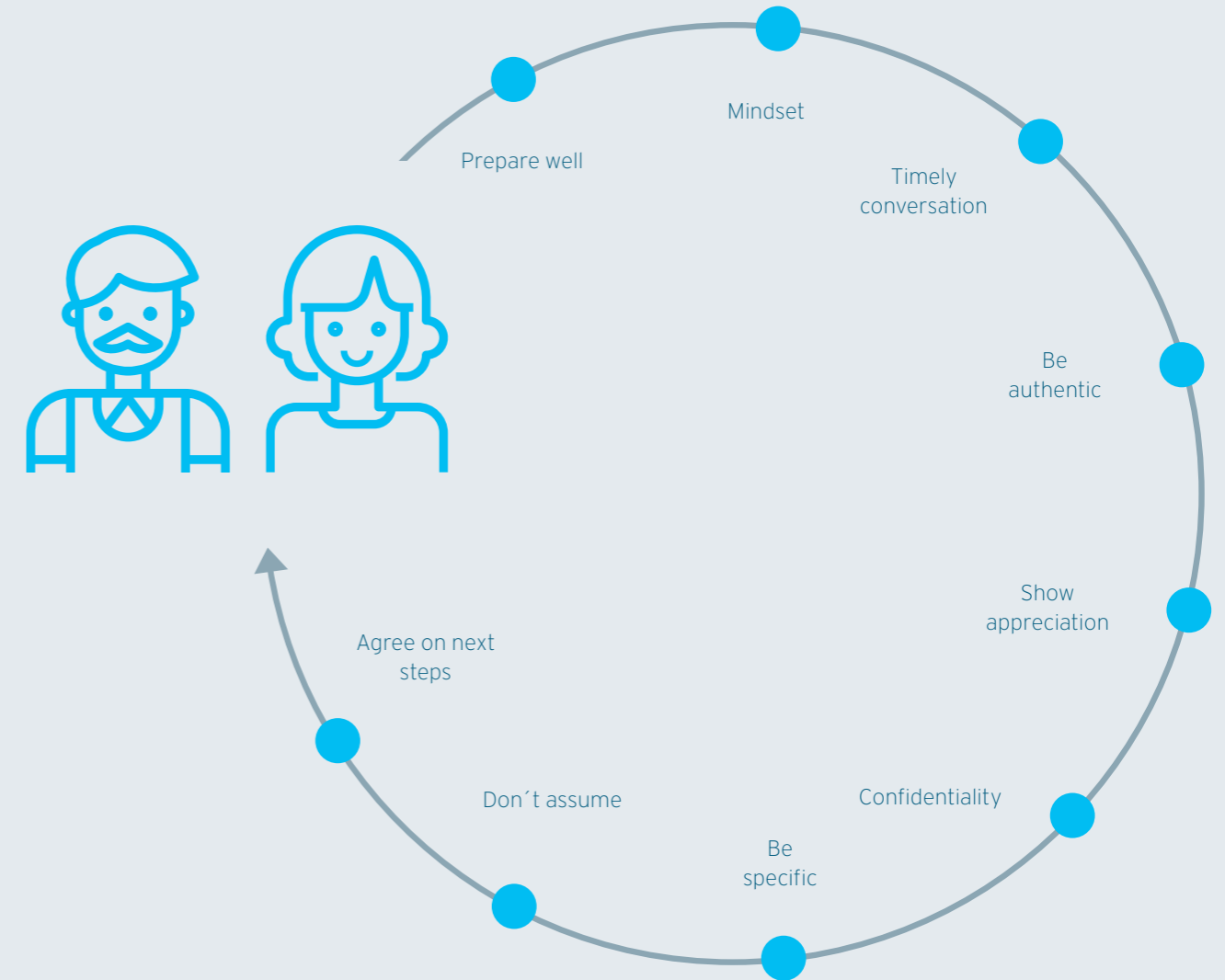
Decrease of productivity

## What should be considered when talking to an affected person?

A conversation between the manager and the person concerned can provide information as to whether and to what extent the person is under psychological strain or whether there are signs of a mental illness. **Good preparation is the basis for a successful conversation.** The manager must be clear on what they want to achieve with the conversation in advance.

After the initial conversation, it is important stay involved so that a lasting improvement can be achieved. Therefore, a follow-up conversation is necessary. elipsLife Care Management can also be involved after the first conversation to support the manager and the person concerned.

In the event of a negative development, human resources and/or the medical officer must be involved. The person concerned is to be informed of this with reference to the employer's duty of care.



See What is important for a successful conversation? on page 24

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02.

Practical advice  
and examples



# What is important for a successful conversation? Conversation guidelines

## Prepare well

- What is the objective?
- How do I address the person concerned?
- What own observations were made?
- When is the best time and where is the best place?



### Note:

- Take your time.
- Define the purpose of the conversation:
  - For example, understanding why the person's behaviour has changed or prompting them to change their behaviour.

## Mindset

- The manager is not a therapist/psychologist or coach.
- Your task is not to solve the problems of the person concerned.



- Therefore, the manager should not ask how they can support, but ask the person concerned what could help them.

## Timely Conversation

- The sooner the manager takes action after recognising warning signals, the sooner the person concerned can be supported.



- Addressing the issue early on helps avoid misunderstandings. At the same time, it can also have positive effects on the possible course of the illness and the preservation of the work capacity.

## Be authentic

- Authenticity builds trust.



- The person concerned will recognise or sense when the manager is not being honest.

## Show appreciation

- Appreciation is of particular importance so that the person concerned does not take the manager's observations as an accusation.



### Helpful phrases:

- I appreciate you, so it worries me that ...
- It is important to me that we speak about it.
- I can understand that ...
- What would help you?

## Confidentiality

- The manager ensures the confidentiality of the conversation..



- Only if the person concerned can be sure that the content of the conversation will be treated confidentially will he or she confide in the supervisor.

# What is important for a successful interview?

## Conversation guidelines

### Be specific

- The discussion purpose must be clearly stated at the beginning, and the employment relationship is in the focus of the discussion.
- Name specific examples.
- The person concerned should also be asked for his or her opinion. Open questions are helpful here.



### Helpful phrases:

- Latley, I have noticed ...
- How do you perceive it?
- Have you noticed any changes yourself, if so, which ones?
- How can you explain the changes?

How the person concerned is adressed depends on his or her personality.

### Don't assume

- It is not allowed to make assumptions, e.g. that a mental illness might be present. Likewise, no diagnoses are to be made. This is only speculation at this point.



- It is not the task of the manager to make of the diagnoses. This is not within the competence by the manager and is not expected person concerned.

### Agree on next steps

- The manager and the person concerned determine the next steps to improve the situation. An appointment is then made for a follow-up meeting, if necessary with the involvement of elipsLife Care Management.



- The primary purpose of the initial interview is to present observations.
- In order to achieve a lasting improvement, it is necessary to agree on further steps.

# Practical example 1

## Controller, 48 years old

In the past two months, the employee has called in sick on six separate working days. His work performance has also deteriorated within this period. Until then, the employee had always completed his tasks on time and without errors. **Now there were more and more mistakes and, agreed deadlines were not met.** When asked, he reacted irritably and left the office each time.

**The supervisor therefore considered a discussion with the employee necessary.** The supervisor's goal was to understand the reasons for the change and to clarify what could help the employee concerned to perform as usual again. To avoid uncertainty on the part of the employee, he did not make an appointment with him in advance, but went to the employee's office when he was there alone.

Employee – E | Supervisor - S

S | Hello Thomas, are you the last one again today?

E | This is no exception. I have a lot to do.

S | True, we always have a lot of work. That can also be very stressful. I sometimes feel that way. And you?

E | There have been better times ...



**S |** As you know, I value you as a reliable and competent employee. You are well liked by your colleagues, especially because of your commitment and reliability. I have now noticed that, for several weeks, you have not kept important appointments and have made more mistakes. Several times you were sick for a few days and you seemed irritable during conversations. This is not like you at all. I am worried about you. Therefore, I would like to understand how it came to this and how I can help you so that you can carry out your tasks again with the usual quality. You can be sure that I will treat our conversation and the content confidentially.

**E |** Which mistakes? Which appointments?

**S |** For example, you did not prepare the last quarterly report until a week after the agreed deadline. Important figures were also missing. The evaluation for the management on the costs for the purchase of goods was completed two weeks late, and the figures for the last quarter were not included. When we talked about it, you said in an annoyed way: „What do I care about the management“ or „What is this nonsense“ and left the office. Then there are the separate sick days in the last eight weeks, six in total. That's not like you at all. That's why I would like to know how you perceived the situation.

**E |** It wasn't quite the way you described it. It's just all quite a lot at the moment. With the old tool, I knew exactly how it worked, evaluations were created quickly and easily. The new evaluation tool is very complicated. I simply can't cope with it. That's why I didn't meet the agreed deadlines.

**S |** I can understand that very well. Yesterday, I also took a closer look at the tool. It is not self-explanatory and quite complicated. I'm just confused that you didn't seek a conversation with me and that you reacted so irritably. I know you as a solution-oriented employee who has talked to me about such things when problems arose in the past.

**E |** I really didn't have time for a conversation. What could you have done? I tried everything to meet the deadlines, didn't take any breaks, double- and triple-checked everything.

**S |** We could have worked together to find a solution that could have helped you.

**E |** Normally, I manage everything on my own and don't need any help. Somehow, I haven't been able to do anything for months, I don't sleep well, I can't switch off, everything annoys me, I only make mistakes. I also have a hard time concentrating.

**S |** Have you seen a doctor?

**E |** No, not yet. However, next week I have an appointment with my doctor.

**S |** I think it's good that you have an appointment with your doctor. What could help you here in the office?

**E |** Maybe a one-to-one training for the new tool?

**S |** I think that's a very good idea. What do you think about Tamara training you and you working together on the next evaluation for the management, which has to be ready by the end of the month?

**E |** That would be helpful.

**S |** Fine, I'll talk to Tamara tomorrow, but just tell her that you're not that familiar with the new tool yet. Everything else remains between us. It's important to me that we continue to talk about problems like this. I would therefore like to talk to you again in a fortnight to find out how you're doing.

**E |** Agreed. Thank you for your understanding.

## Practical example 2

### CNC programmer<sup>1</sup>, 32 years old

**In the last eight weeks, the employee came to work late several times.**

He has been absent, unfocused and forgetful for some time. His work performance has been very erratic over the same period. He made many careless mistakes. **The supervisor could not explain the behaviour and poor work performance.** Until recently, the employee was reliable and his work was always flawless. After the lunch break, the supervisor asked the employee to come to his office to find out the reasons for his behaviour in the last few weeks..

**S |** Thank you for coming to my office. Boris, what's wrong with you? You're my best man, I could always rely on you, and your work was always top notch. But things have changed in the last few weeks. You've been late more often lately. Off the record, what's wrong with you? I am worried about you.

**E |** You're exaggerating about being late, and everyone makes mistakes sometimes.

**S |** In the past two weeks you have been late for work four times, on Thursday it was even one hour. On our special order last month, you programmed the machine incorrectly so that all the pieces produced were faulty. Fortunately, the quality control noticed this. The same thing happened again with the special order this week, although the colleagues noticed the error early and we were able to correct it. When I asked you about it, I had the feeling that you weren't interested at all. You didn't really listen to me.

**E |** Things just aren't going well at the moment.

**S |** What do you mean?

**E |** You know, my wife left me and took the children with her. Now I live alone in our house, with a big mortgage, I have to pay maintenance and I don't know how I'm going to manage everything. All the overtime here, the chaos at home, there's still a lot to sort out with banks etc. I just can't get anything done. Everything is getting to me. It's hard for me to keep my mind on things here.

**S |** I can understand that you are not doing well and that a lot of things have to be sorted out. It's really hard. You have also worked a lot of overtime in the last few months and have always stepped in when there was a need. What would help you here at work to feel better?

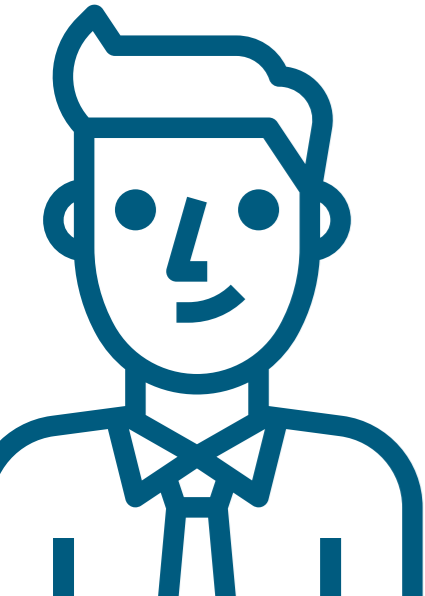
**E |** It would certainly help if I could get rid of some overtime. Maybe then I'd have a bit of peace and quiet and time to get things sorted out.

**S |** OK. What do you think about cutting back on overtime for the next four weeks and staying home on Mondays?

**E |** That would certainly help me. I just don't want colleagues to know about the reasons for the reduction in overtime.

**S |** Then that's how we'll do it. I will take this into account when planning the work schedule. I will only tell the colleagues that we have talked about your overtime and that we have agreed to reduce it. However, I would like to talk to you again in two weeks so that I know how you are doing and what else would help you if necessary.

**E |** Okay. We'll do it like this. Thanks for your help.





## Employees suffering from psychological strain: What can colleagues do?

If a member of the team (colleague) shows signs of psychological stress over a longer period of time, it is important to stay in contact with them. For example, by enquiring about how they are feeling.

If the situation does not improve, it makes sense to have a private conversation with the person concerned and describe the observation. Often, the person concerned is not even aware of their behaviour or they believe that their change in behaviour would not be noticed by third parties.

If the mistakes of the person concerned which have an impact on the work accumulate, or the cooperation becomes increasingly difficult, he/she must be told that this must be communicated to the superior. Only then can he or she fulfil this duty of care.

By agreement with the supervisor, elipsLife Care Management can also be consulted at any time.



### Key points of the conversation

- Show appreciation
- Share observations
- Express concerns
- Share information with superiors (if necessary)

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## Superiors suffering from psychological strain: What can employees do?

**Mental illnesses can affect anyone - including superiors.** For employees, dealing with this is often difficult. But here, too, it is important to act.

If employees observe signs of psychological stress in the supervisor - if the supervisor repeatedly makes mistakes that have a negative impact on the work or the team, or if the cooperation in the team is impaired as a result - employees should inform their supervisor's manager about this. The manager should be informed of the observations without making assumptions. It is then the task of the supervisor's manager to fulfil his or her duty of care.

**Addressing the supervisor personally is not the responsibility of the employees.**



## **Contact**

**BGM@elipslife.com**

## **elipsLife - your insurance**

**Thurgauerstrasse 54 | PO Box | CH-8050 Zürich**

**T +41 44 215 45 40 | F +41 44 215 45 44**

**www.elipsLife.com**

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