



Absence from work due to psychological problems?



The 8 steps to a healthy solution

At home due to psychological problems?

these are 8 rules of thumb to ensure that absence from work does not persist any longer than necessary!

Every adult occasionally has to contend with a high load at work, at home or both. As long as this load is in balance with a person's coping abilities, there is no reason why it should lead to sick leave. However, if such a burden is accompanied by other psychological or physical disorders, a breakdown may occur. In 2001 the main reason for 34% of applications for disability pensions was psychological in origin. However complex these cases sometimes are, we have shown that they can be managed.

How can we make sure that no one has to endure unresolved problems for longer than necessary? How can we ensure that absence is not needlessly prolonged? There is now consensus in the Netherlands on the above. First among professionals, later on embraced by employers, unions and finally by the government who made this new approach legally imperative. To start with, these are the 8 rules of thumb that changed our mindset:

1 A little rest is a good thing, but leaving someone alone makes matters worse!

'First make sure that you get better!' Although this advice is well meant, one thing is certain: passively waiting at home and failing to gain insight and change has never made anyone better! The longer someone postpones the start of his recovery, the smaller the chance that he will be able to return to his job. It is preferable to seek help quickly and make temporary adjustments to the job, than to sit idly at home...

2 Work is often the best medicine

The idea that 'things will get better by themselves' is a false hope. Rest and switch-off time can be a good thing, but the realisation that you have to regain control over your life is essential. The structure of work (even part time) and the social contacts with colleagues definitely contribute to one's recovery.

3 Employee and employer share responsibility; they should never have to deal with the problem on their own

We don't want to know too much about our colleagues' psychological illnesses. Out of ignorance - or is it still a taboo to be interested in such delicate private matters? The period of silence between the employer and the sick employee often lasts too long. 'Leave them alone until they get better' is a failing concept; there is no invisible hand that leads to recovery. Only if both parties take responsibility, start to interact and face problems will the problems be resolved and recovery take place. If necessary the employer and employee can always seek expert help, for example from the company doctor or the counsellor and sometimes from others like the general practitioner.

4 Treatment or resumption of work alone is not always the solution

Medical or psychological treatment alone is not enough to get someone back to work successfully. But neither is "work till you drop" because it leads to presentism. A combination of both tracks is most often successful: both working at individual recovery and finding suitable temporary work or making adjustments to the job. In order to achieve this situation, employee and manager must agree on what should be done, write it down and stick to that plan.

5 Hiding behind the other party doesn't solve anything

Is the employer not pulling his weight? Is the sick employee not cooperating? Neither of these can be an excuse for 'the other party' to do nothing. With some psychological problems, a person is unable to get better on his own. Sometimes the manager does not know what support he can offer, or how he can arrange appropriate work. He will then have to call for external assistance. Whatever perspective you take on the matter, starting to act too late means that recovery will take even longer, problems will get worse and the chance of ending up on permanent disability pension is greater, with all the financial burden that that entails. Increasingly employers are faced with liabilities because of workstress, bullying or abuse. Hiding behind the faults of the other party therefore makes matters worse. On top of that a disability benefit in the Netherlands will only be awarded after a strict assessment of both parties having legally fulfilled their obligations towards each other.

6 A successful solution demands openness

A Dutch employer may ask what the situation is and which tasks the employee thinks he still can handle. The employer may also inform whether the employee has already started treatment and when he thinks he will be back at work. The employer is entitled to these answers as far as the employee's privacy is not invaded. A specific diagnosis need not be communicated - only sufficient information so as to provide an understanding of the given situation. The employee is entitled to all the support and information from the employer necessary for recovery and return to work. These entitlements are completely compatible with confidentiality and privacy legislation.

7 Psychological incapacity to work usually has its roots in both the person and the work

The disorder alone is usually not the decisive factor in becoming unfit for work. The content of the work and the extent to which a person is able to influence the performance of his duties, plus the relationship with management and colleagues, also have a considerable effect. In other words, the person concerned must examine his own possible contribution, and at the same time the employer must try to identify the innate risks to health in his company. The prevention of absence will not succeed without systematically identifying and tackling health risks in the organization.

8 There was a last straw, but the camel's back was already weak

Everyone has a significant chance of becoming unfit for work because of stress or a nervous breakdown, at least once in their career. The possible underlying reasons are almost infinite: unresolved domestic problems, work stress or strained relations with others at work. Psychiatric disorders or other individual personality traits may also play a role. Therefore, even though a combination of causes is often involved, psychological disorders can be made manageable, also for the people at home, colleagues and the boss. Feeling wretched and the sense of hopelessness are very real to those undergoing a psychological crisis, but treatment and recovery are almost always perfectly feasible. It is essential that the sick person and the people in his environment learn to pick up signals and respond to them quickly.

Periode	Employee's Action	Employer's Action
<p>1st week</p> <p>Employee reports sick</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● employee is open for contact with the employer or his own manager, whose questions he tries to answer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the manager or supervisor (not HRM or the doctor) returns the sick employee's call on or before the 2nd day ● enquires about the reason for reporting sick, and asks if the problem is related to work ● asks what the employee can still do in spite of the illness ● asks when he thinks he will be able to work again and what that might entail ● writes a brief report and arranges to make contact again within one week
<p>2nd week</p> <p>Absence appears likely to persist for a longer time; there is no clear prospect of a rapid recovery</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● takes as much rest as necessary and keeps as much distance from the company as needed, but does not passively await developments ● reflects on the cause of his problems and possible solutions ● seeks support from the company doctor, general practitioner, psychologist, or other expert if needed ● guards against dwelling on the problems for an excessively long time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● asks whether things are already improving, asks whether the cause of being unable to work is already clear, asks whether help has been sought ● remains alert and respectful: inquires about possible solutions, asks what is necessary to form a picture of the problems, contributes ideas on clearing the path towards partial or complete return to work ● do the answers provide insufficient clarity? ● He will ask the company doctor to make an appointment with the employee if there is no clear prospect of rapid recovery
<p>no later than the 5th week</p> <p>The absence appears likely to persist for much longer than 4 weeks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● provides as much information as necessary to the manager or supervisor, with due regard for privacy ● cooperates with the occupational health service or company doctor to get a grasp on problems and solutions ● together with the employer, draws up an action plan for partial or complete return, with necessary support, which he carries out together with the manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● maintains contact with the employee on possible solutions and offers modified work, if possible ● requests the company doctor to investigate what causes the absence and to draw up a multicausal problemanalysis to fully address the issues on hand ● monitors whether the problems are being investigated and treated ● together with the employee, draws up a plan for partial or complete return, and also carries the plan out
<p>6th -12th week</p> <p>Absence is complex and long term</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● remains open to support and treatment ● maintains contact with manager and company doctor ● requests a second opinion if required: what is suitable work? What will happen if I end up on disability benefit (WIA)? ● accepts modified work if the employer offers it in the interests of recovery ● cooperates in making the problem situation manageable for people at home, colleagues and the manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● discusses additional steps with the employee as advised by the company doctor, ● requests together with employee, if required, an expert opinion from the employed persons' insurance administration agency:
<p>after 12th week</p> <p>Evaluation of the recovery and possible reintegration</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● maintains regular contact with the manager and with the company doctor ● records in writing the steps that he has taken to help his recovery and partial or complete resumption of work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● discusses the recovery and possible reintegration at least 1x every 6 weeks with employer and company doctor ● records all agreed actions in writing ● evaluates the efforts and results between week 46 and week 52 and records these together with the employee in a first year's evaluation
<p>until 104th week</p> <p>During the partial or complete return to work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● reflects on how he can avoid being unfit for work again; what should I do different at work or how should I arrange work differently? ● asks himself what signals he should learn to recognize stress and what can he do to respond to them and prevent recurrence? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● asks himself: is a grant available for reintegration, how long do I have to continue wage payment? ● reflects on how he can avoid the employee becoming unfit for work again; what adjustments should I make to the work or how should I arrange the work differently? ● asks which signals should I learn to recognize and what do I have to do to respond to them?

Absent because of psychological problems? Both the EMPLOYEE AND EMPLOYER HAVE TO ACT!

The approach described in the previous pages can be summed up in one sentence:

employer and employee have a joint responsibility in achieving, as quickly as possible the best results.

What is actually expected of the employee:

- Maintains contact with manager or supervisor and, if necessary calls, on a confidential counsellor if contact with the manager or supervisor forms an obstacle
- Is willing to discuss the problems, possibly after a time-out to exchange ideas on causes and possible solutions
- Is communicative about the cause, the treatment and the recovery with the company doctor
- Takes good care of himself and timely seeks any necessary treatment
- Cooperates in resuming work, if necessary not in his current job

What is actually expected of the employer

- Maintains contact and offers social support alongside support in resuming work and dealing with problems
- Adopts a rational and problem-solving attitude, helps identify causes and solutions
- Engages professional support as soon as the absence appears likely to be long term or complex
- Arranges adjustments to the work in order to aid recovery

Adjustments to the work that aid recovery

It is self-evident that resuming work is a good step on the path to recovery. The employee who actively wants to recover should be able to count on the employer making adaptations to his work so that it's modified to the employee's temporary limitations and does not hinder his treatment. The person concerned must indeed often accept a temporary demotion, but this does not mean 'debilitating work', and certainly not catching up with all the work that has been piled up! The work must be well structured, without strain or stress and must aid recovery. There are problems attached to being too sharply focused on resuming work: encouraging someone to take on duties before he can cope with them can actually reinforce his sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. On the other hand, going too far in sparing someone is usually equally detrimental. Finding this right balance is easier over a cup of coffee.

If the employer has no reasonable, adjusted work, then he can temporarily offer it outside his own company if suitable work is available. If it appears that the employee may no longer be able to return to his old job, it is thought reasonable for him to accept a different position or cooperate in outplacement.

Conflict? Seek mediation without delay!

The scheme set out in the previous pages assumes that the employee wishes to continue to work for his employer. But what if a serious conflict at work actually causes the problem? If one party considers that the working relationship is jeopardised, then the following applies.

- The employee seeks treatment for his psychological complaints, if any
- At the same time, the employer and employee attempt to identify the core of the conflict through mediation and try to better working relationships or make an exit arrangement if that is in the interests of both parties.

The company doctor discusses with the employee whether there are other causes for the problems than the conflict at work. The stress disorder often arises directly from a conflict. In such case, a temporary time-out may be necessary, but under these circumstances we recommend that a professional be immediately engaged as a mediator. Mediation of this kind usually leads to good results and it avoids the unpleasantness of a lawsuit.

Back to work, but not in the same company? Outplacement!

After mediation has taken place, both parties may come to the conclusion that an exit strategy should be sought and that they should part company. This will frequently be the case if the relationship between them has irretrievably broken down. It then becomes necessary to seek alternative employment. This is sometimes possible in a different department, but in most cases, it is necessary to look outside the confines of the same company. As long as a Dutch employee cooperates in his disability management, he is entitled to payment of his wages for two years. The employer can manage this period by cooperating actively in solving the conflict. If the relationship has gone completely sour on both sides one may come to the conclusion that it would be better to leave the company on the basis of exit agreements. Finding alternative work is then offered outside the company. If outplacement is unsuccessful and a disability benefit has been applied for, there will be an assessment of whether both parties did all in their power to resolve the conflict or to find and accept suitable, adjusted work. 'Digging in your heels' always comes at a cost to one party or the other.

Possible disputes? Seek professional advice in advance

When assessing the application for a disability benefit, consideration will be given by the insurance company to whether the employer and employee followed the above recommendations and rules. There may be vast financial consequences if either party did choose a different course of action without good reason or is accused of not having done its best. Because of the complexity of the matter one should seek advice or guidance by a professional such as the occupational health service or others. But responsibilities can't be shifted away!



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This brochure presents an abbreviated version of the guideline 'Approach to absence for psychological reasons' that was drawn up in 2001 by the committee for psychological work incapacity, which has been acting for the committee 'the Working Perspective' since April 2003. For further information, please visit www.werkendperspectief.nl.

This brochure is available from the Employers' Forum on Health Management Office, PO Box 718, 2130 AS Hoofddorp, +31 (23) 554 9944.



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