



# ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AND STRESS

- PREVENTING AND DEALING WITH STRESS



AARHUS UNIVERSITY

# INTRODUCTION

The main resource of Aarhus University is its staff. The university's 2009 psychological workplace assessment showed considerable commitment among staff. They appreciate their interesting and varied tasks, which challenge their academic knowledge, creativity and interpersonal skills. In order for university staff to deliver their best, job satisfaction and general well-being must be taken seriously and given high priority. It is the management's responsibility to ensure a standard of behaviour, communication, task prioritisation and conflict management that helps prevent stress in the workplace.

The purpose of this folder is to contribute to stress prevention during a period of major changes. This is achieved by drawing attention to the sources of stress and the factors that can influence staff during periods of major change. Reducing and preventing stress is the responsibility of everyone at Aarhus University – from organisational level through to management, colleagues and the individual staff members themselves.

*Rector Lauritz B. Holm-Nielsen*

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## Background for the folder

Aarhus University is a modern workplace experiencing change. The university is currently undergoing an academic development process, resulting in initiatives such as the merging of faculties and departments. This can impact on the future tasks and geographical location of the staff.

This change process interferes with day-to-day work, and the staff can 'sense' the changes, so to speak. You can get a feeling of being in a vacuum where questions like "What work will I be doing?", "Who will my new colleagues be?" and "Where will we be located?" can lead to feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. Comprehensive and ongoing change processes can increase the risk of stress, and Aarhus University wishes to prevent this.

To prevent stress, it is important to know what stress is – what is fact and what is fiction? It can have unfortunate consequences if a busy working day is always associated with stress, as staff members actually suffering from genuine stress are then more likely to be overlooked, and therefore may not receive the necessary assistance.

With this folder, Aarhus University wishes to focus on the following:

- *What does organizational change mean to the work environment?*
- *What is stress?*
- *What can lead to stress?*
- *How can staff and managers get help?*

## Organizational change

Change does not necessarily lead to stress, but it is important to emphasise that change can have a negative influence on stress in many ways.

The restructuring at Aarhus University makes it necessary that all staff understand and adapt to any changes to their work environment. This process requires extra energy, and over a longer period of time, this can contribute to stress. In addition, change can result in a certain amount of uncertainty and insecurity among staff.

In the workplace, this can take the form of thoughts like “How will my responsibilities be

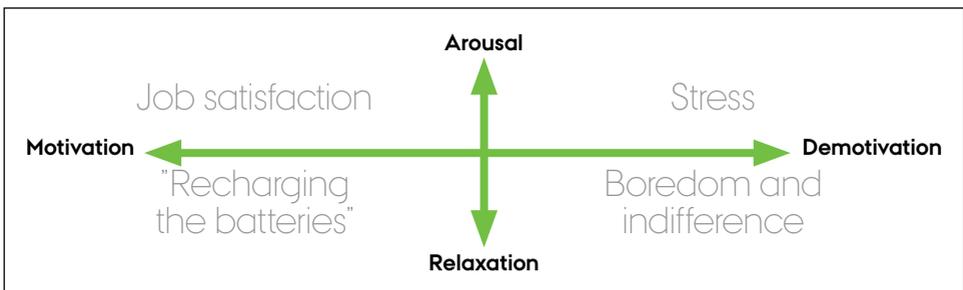
affected?”, “Do I have the right skills?” or “Who will my new colleagues be?” Such unanswered questions can create confusion for individual staff members and among staff groups. Confusion about mutual demands and expectations can give rise to misunderstandings that, in a worst-case scenario, can develop into power struggles, conflicts within the group, a lack of commitment and stress for individual staff members. Change also affects many of the areas mentioned as sources of stress, which means that change can contribute to increasing the sources of stress.

## What is stress?

Stress is not an illness. There is no medical diagnosis called ‘stress’, and the word stress can therefore easily become a term used to describe physical and mental discomfort during a busy day. A definition of the concept of stress, as it is often used in Denmark, is that stress is a state of high arousal and demotivation.

Arousal can be interpreted as a high level of activity. Many experience arousal as a process of flow: they are so absorbed in a particular activity and so focused on it that they lose their sense of time and forget themselves.

**Figure 1:** Arousal and motivation



Being aroused for a short period of time can be described as *short-term stress*. Short-term stress causes the body to go into high alert, and the senses are sharpened, for example. Short-term stress is therefore an appropriate reaction that helps you increase your performance.

Being aroused for an extended period of time can be described as chronic stress. *Chronic stress* means that the body is on high alert for an extended period of time. What was an appropriate reaction therefore becomes a reaction with potentially harmful effects. Chronic stress develops into a state of high arousal and demotivation, and can be described according to a number of physical, psychological and behavioural reactions that differ from one person to the next.

*“I’ve always enjoyed my work and been pleased with the huge challenges and the fact that each day was different, but suddenly I started feeling I didn’t have the strength to do certain jobs, and one day I didn’t feel like going to work at all. I just couldn’t understand it ...”*

**Table 1:** Physical, psychological and behavioural reactions:

#### **Physical**

- Headache
- Heart palpitations
- Dizziness
- Stomach pains
- Diarrhoea
- Nausea
- Aggravation of infections and chronic illness
- Reduced libido

#### **Psychological**

- Memory lapses
- Difficulties concentrating
- Lack of direction
- Crowded thoughts
- Fatigue/a feeling of exhaustion
- Irritability
- Loss of sense of humour
- Teariness
- Demotivation

#### **Behavioural**

- Disturbed sleep
- Loss of appetite
- Reduced performance
- Low self-esteem
- Indecisiveness
- Introvertedness
- Short fuse/anger and aggression
- Increased use of stimulants
- Increased absenteeism

What is important in the handling of stress is *firstly* to ensure that the staff member has an opportunity to alternate between performing and ‘relaxing’. In other words, in the course of a week there is both arousal and relaxation in the job as well as at home.

*Secondly*, it is important to regard stress as a fundamentally neutral concept that fluctuates between motivation and demotivation. The dynamic understanding of stress is helpful in that regard.

**Figure 2:** A dynamic understanding of stress



Stress is a dynamic phenomenon, and it can therefore be difficult to determine whether it is green or red stress that is dominating at any given point in time.

Only a fine line separates the two, and the green stress can therefore imperceptibly move towards the red area if the level of engagement gets out of control, for example, and the individual overlooks the body’s warning signs.

The model tries to give a more nuanced understanding of the stress concept. This can help improve the psychological work environment in the workplace, as it is important to determine the factors that boost energy and those that drain energy in connection with preventing and dealing with stress.

- **Stress** is not an illness.
- **Stress** is a state of arousal and demotivation.
- **Stress** manifests as a number of physical, psychological and behavioural reactions.
- **Stress** is appropriate in suitable doses
  - as long as the individual has the opportunity to relax again.

## What can lead to work stress?

Previously, the lack of influence on one's own work was the primary source of stress. Today, most people experience that they can influence their work, the planning of the work and its execution. In addition, work is often structured as projects and team work, and this makes huge demands on the flexibility, self-discipline and interpersonal skills of the individual. This type

of work can lead to questions such as "When is my work done?", "Who does what?" and "Do I have to be available by e-mail and phone over the weekend?". Unless these questions and roles are clarified, it can be difficult for a staff member to judge when a task has been satisfactorily solved – and therefore completed.

The sources of work stress can be divided into the following three categories:

### **The "traditional" sources**

Pace, monotonous work, a lack of influence, few development opportunities  
(e.g. routine work)

### **The "relational" sources**

High emotional demands, unclear demands, role conflicts, other conflicts, violence and threats, demanding users  
(e.g. consultancy and advisory work, etc.)

### **The "modern" sources**

Never-ending demands, blurred lines between work and leisure, a lack of predictability, individualised demands and expectations  
(e.g. research, project work, IT, etc.)

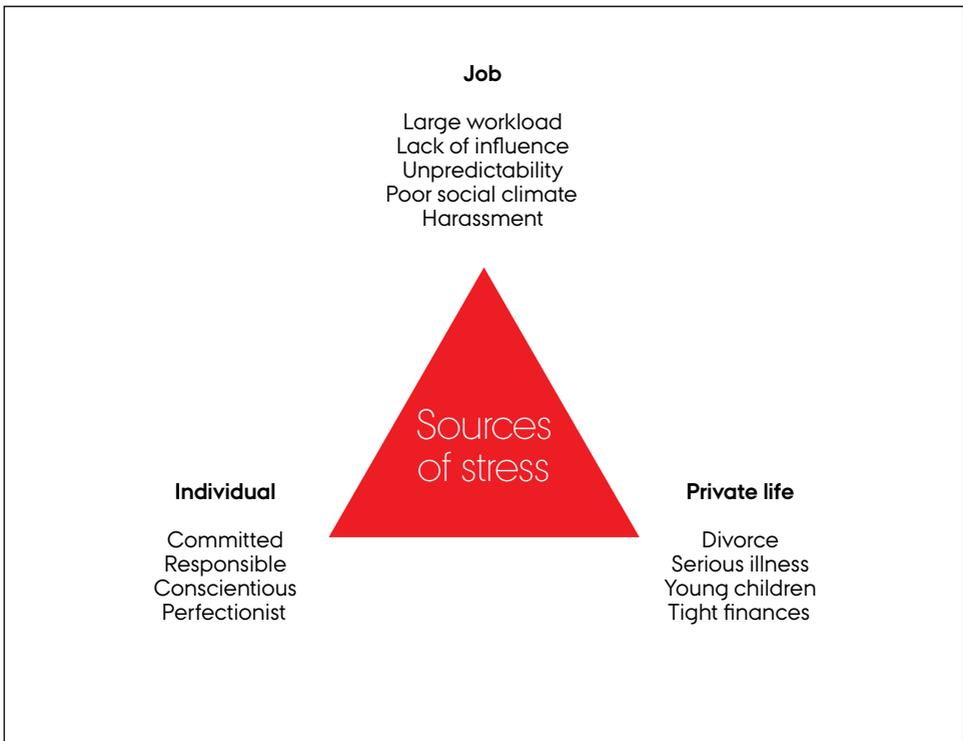
It is rarely possible to isolate the different sources of stress in the course of a working day. What leads to stress can only be understood if seen in a context. If a task is a source of stress, it is important to examine what aspects of the

task cause the stress. Is it the collaboration about the task? Is it a lack of qualifications? Is it the number of tasks of this nature or the complexity of the task?

The stress psychology triangle shows that stress rarely comes from a single source. Stress is most often caused by a combination of several work-related sources, and the individual's

private life and the expectations and demands the person has to himself/herself also play an important role.

**Figure 3:** The stress psychology triangle



## Stress prevention

Stress prevention requires a joint effort at work, as stress is a shared responsibility. Everyone in the workplace must therefore work to prevent and limit stress, and all levels of the workplace must be involved in this work.

### At the organisational level

The workplace is responsible for the goals and strategies that define the framework for the work performed by the staff and therefore their well-being, including:

- occupational health and safety work, e.g. work assessment procedures and tools.
- staff policies regarding interviews in connection with absence due to illness, etc.
- competence development.

### At the management level

The manager plays a key role in stress prevention.

The manager must be a leader in this field by:

- being aware of the sources of stress.
- promoting openness and dialogue about stress.
- reacting if a staff member does not appear to be thriving.

### At group level

Staff members are responsible for contributing to well-being and collaboration in the workplace by:

- clarifying roles and responsibilities within the group and with the immediate supervisor.
- being polite when communicating with colleagues – also in stressful situations.
- paying attention to the well-being of colleagues.
- actively supporting new initiatives to promote well-being in the workplace.

### At an individual level

Staff members are also responsible for contributing to well-being and collaboration by:

- becoming familiar with their own stress signals and asking for help, if necessary.
- asking and listening to colleagues about their well-being.

## Stress is a shared responsibility at Aarhus University

At Aarhus University, the **management** has a special responsibility with regard to preventing and dealing with stress. Although stress is often caused by many different factors, the organisation and planning of the work play an important role in the workplace. The management must therefore be able to help the staff clarify their roles and ensure their co-determination through dialogue. When a staff member is absent due to illness, it is the responsibility of the manager to provide the necessary assistance, for example by contacting Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) at AU Human Resources (HR), the staff member's OHS group or by invoking local agreements.

As a **colleague**, you are responsible for creating a good climate/working environment in your

own employee group. Mutual awareness and a clear understanding of your own responsibilities and those of others are two fundamental components. If you notice stress symptoms in a colleague, it might be helpful to have a chat to the person in question and perhaps help by contacting the immediate supervisor or OHS representative and asking them to deal with the matter.

As a **staff member**, you are responsible for yourself, of course, in terms of being aware of your own stress symptoms and stopping to ask for help from your immediate supervisor or OHS representative. In addition to approaching the immediate supervisor or OHS representative, the staff at Aarhus University can ask for help from OHS at AU Human Resources.

## Preventing and dealing with stress at Aarhus University

There is no uniform procedure for preventing and dealing with stress at Aarhus University. OHS at AU Human Resources has established collaboration with psychologists working for an authorised OHS adviser. The procedure is that the immediate supervisor can contact OHS at AU Human Resources in the event that a staff member is suffering from stress. OHS at AU Hu-

man Resources coordinates assistance with the psychologist, who contacts the person suffering from stress, whereupon anonymous assistance is offered in the form of five consultations. Any additional consultations must be agreed with the immediate supervisor – either directly or via OHS at AU Human Resources. The costs are covered locally.

*”The worst part of it was to see my own commitment and ability to judge disappear, both at work and at home. Thanks to the professional assistance, I was able to recover and quickly regained my pleasure in interacting with others. Today, I would ask for help sooner.”*

Staff member at Aarhus University

## Workshop on stress and change

In 2011, OHS at AU Human Resources will organise 35 local workshops in collaboration with the OHS adviser CRECEA A/S.

The purpose of each workshop is to focus on specific local issues relating to stress and

change. A workshop consists of an introductory meeting with a manager and, if relevant, an OHS representative; a half-day workshop and a follow-up meeting.

### Two examples of workshops

**1:** A department with 35 members of staff has repeatedly experienced sick leave on account of stress. It wishes to discuss the issue of stress to prevent and deal with this problem as well as possible in the future.

**2:** A group of staff members feel uncertain about the current change processes and therefore wish to acquire tools to deal with the situation.

If your department, section or group would like to avail yourselves of this offer for a workshop, please briefly describe the issue in question and submit an application to OHS at AU Hu-

man Resources at [arbejdsmiljo@au.dk](mailto:arbejdsmiljo@au.dk). You will then receive further information and perhaps be referred to CRECEA A/S.



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**You can find further information here**

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