Preventing mental health-related absence before sickness absence occurs



A practical whitepaper for HR professionals and managers in manufacturing and engineering

Recognize early warning signs, have effective conversations and provide employees with targeted support.

The key message

Mental health issues usually do not develop overnight. The best opportunity to make a difference is when an employee is still at work but is beginning to show signs of being out of balance.

Mental Fitness Program

Early employability coaching | tools and training for managers | structural integration into HR policy

Introduction

An employee calls in sick due to stress, mental overload or symptoms of burnout. For many organizations, this comes as a surprise. In practice, however, the situation has often been developing for some time. Behavior changes, energy levels decline, and recovery becomes more difficult. Yet the conversation sometimes only starts when the employee is no longer able to work.

This is where HR professionals and managers have an opportunity to make a difference. Not by monitoring every employee or trying to solve mental health issues themselves, but by recognizing changes earlier, creating a safe space for conversation and making appropriate support available quickly.

Important distinction

Recognizing early warning signs is not the same as making a diagnosis. Nor can it prevent every form of mental health-related absence. It can, however, help identify work-related risks earlier, adjust work where possible, and ensure that support is accessible.

In this white paper

- Why mental health-related absence requires attention, even when employees still appear to be functioning normally.
- Which signs you can recognize without making assumptions about medical or personal issues.
- How managers can start the conversation without taking on the role of a healthcare professional.
- How to embed prevention in daily working practices and HR policy.
- How MEPD's Mental Fitness Program can help.

In summary

1 **Look for changes, not isolated signs.**

A busy week, a mistake or a single short absence does not necessarily mean much. If someone's behavior changes over a longer period, however, it deserves attention.

2 **Make these conversations part of good management.**

Managers do not need to be psychologists. Their role is primarily to listen, ask questions, discuss work pressure and know which appropriate next steps are available.

3 **Adress the working environment too.**

Coaching can support employees and help them move forward. But if the underlying cause lies in work planning, capacity or collaboration, the risk will remain.

1. Why this issue cannot wait

Mental strain at work is not a minor issue. In the 2025 Netherlands Working Conditions Survey, 21% of employees reported experiencing symptoms of burnout. In addition, 15% had a stressful job and 37% felt that additional measures were needed to address psychosocial workload. [1]

For organizations in manufacturing and engineering, there are additional challenges. Work is often carried out under pressure, with shortages of skilled professionals, complex projects, shift work or demanding safety and quality requirements. This makes it important to look not only at an employee's ability to cope, but also at how the work itself is organized.

Work pressure is also more than simply an issue of wellbeing. Employers are required to have policies in place to prevent or reduce psychosocial workload, including work pressure. This must also form part of the organization's risk inventory, evaluation and its action plan. [2]

What this DOES NOT mean

Not every mental health issue is caused by work. Personal circumstances, health and individual factors can also be of influence.

From sickness absence management to prevention

Many organizations have well-established sickness absence procedures. These remain important.
But you can often make the biggest difference at an earlier stage: when an employee is still working but is finding it harder to recover, is struggling to concentrate or is becoming more withdrawn.

At this stage, you can discuss the work situation, make small adjustments and offer support before the situation escalates.

TNO research shows that high job demands do not automatically lead to work-related stress. This risk increases particularly when employees have little control over how they organize their work or receive insufficient support. [3]

Prevention is therefore not simply about reducing workloads. It is also about clear priorities, having influence over your work and effective collaboration.

2. Recognizing warning signs without diagnosing

Mental health issues are often less visible than physical health problems. An employee may continue to meet deadlines while gradually losing more energy. Therefore, do not focus solely on performance. Pay particular attention to changes compared with the employee's usual behavior.

Possible warning signs and an appropriate first step

Change	What you may notice	What you can do as a manager
Withdrawal	Less involved in meetings, becoming quiet, seeking less contact.	Ask what is happening at work and describe what you have noticed.
Reduced concentration	More mistakes, difficulty setting priorities, forgetting agreements.	Discuss work pressure, planning and what could temporarily be done differently.
Irritability	Short responses, becoming irritated more quickly, more conflict.	Choose a quiet moment and focus on facts and behavior.
Fatigue	Less energy, arriving late more often, visibly struggling to recover.	Ask how things are going and whether there is enough opportunity for recovery and support.
Short-term sickness absence	More frequent individual sick days or absence following periods of peak workload.	Look at patterns together, without judgement or assumptions.

These signs are never proof of a mental health issue. They are an invitation to pay attention and start a conversation.

"Mariëlle "

HR Manager in the Metalektro sector

"We introduced Mental Fitness because of the high work pressure within our organization. We know that we ask a lot of our people. They are loyal and committed, so we felt it was important to also focus on their mental wellbeing. The mental fitness program gave employees insight into their mental fitness and practical tools to recognize when things were becoming too much. It also helped them discuss these issues with their managers. In short, it was a valuable learning experience for both managers and employees."

3. The manager's role

Managers are often the first to notice that someone's behavior is changing. At the same time, many managers find this a difficult subject to address. That is understandable. A conversation about performance is concrete. A conversation about energy, stress or overload can feel much more personal.

The manager's role is not to determine whether someone is suffering from stress or burnout. Nor does a manager need to become a healthcare professional.

The role is simpler: recognize the signs, start the conversation, look at the work situation together and know what support is available.

A conversation that helps

Step	Example
Start with a factual observation	"I've noticed that you have been quieter in meetings over the past few weeks and that you seem to be finding it more difficult to complete your work."
Ask open questions	"How are you managing your workload?" and "What is taking a lot of your energy at the moment?"
Look at the work situation first	"Which tasks, expectations or commitments are making things difficult?"
Agree on a small, concrete action	For example, clarify priorities, redistribute work, create a less demanding schedule or arrange a follow-up conversation.
Discuss support	Explain which options are available, such as HR, a confidential advisor, the occupational physician or preventive coaching.

What to avoid

Do not ask for a diagnosis or medical information. Do not assume that someone 'has burnout'. And do not simply say: "Just get some rest."

4. Make prevention part of everyday practice

A vitality week or one-off workshop can be a good starting point, but it is not a structural solution.

Prevention works better when it becomes part of normal working practices. For example, include it in team meetings, one-to-one conversations, the planning of peak periods and evaluations of sickness absence and work pressure.

Organizations that make progress in this area usually work at three levels at the same time:

- Employees can recognize warning signs and access support quickly.
- Managers are given the language, knowledge and practical tools to have effective conversations.
- The organization looks at patterns in work pressure, capacity, collaboration and culture.

5. MEPD's Mental Fitness program

Our Mental Fitness Program helps organizations identify mental health issues at an earlier stage and strengthen employability. The approach consists of three complementary interventions. You can start small, but the impact is greater when coaching, management and HR policy are aligned.

1

Workshop and employability coaching

Employees start with the Mental fitness workshop. What is mental fitness, and how can you influence it yourself? Employees complete a questionnaire, followed by a personal consultation to discuss topics such as stress, work pressure, work-life balance and career-related questions. The aim is to provide greater insight, support recovery and give employees practical options for taking action before sickness absence occurs or increases.

The benefit: employees gain earlier insight into what they need and can take concrete steps. This might include setting boundaries, defining priorities, starting a conversation or finding a different way to use their talents.

2

Tools and training for managers

Managers learn how to recognize warning signs, have effective conversations and refer employees to appropriate support when necessary. The training is practical, using short exercises, clear example questions and agreements about when HR or another professional should become involved.

The benefit: managers feel more confident about taking action, while creating a more consistent approach across the organization.

3

Structural integration into HR policy

MEPD provides support through workshops, short questionnaires, regular mental fitness check-ins and monitoring employability at team or organizational level. This ensures that mental health does not remain a one-off project but becomes part of sustainable employability.

The benefit: better insight into recurring challenges and more opportunities to take targeted action on culture, work pressure and leadership.

Important for maintaining trust

Do not use individual information for performance assessment or sickness absence management. For policy development and improvement, only use anonymized patterns at team or organization level.

6. What to measure

Do not measure sickness absence alone. Sickness absence figures often lag what is happening in the workplace. Also look at earlier warning signs and the quality of your approach.

- Perceived work pressure, recovery and social support, measured at team level.
- The number of managers who have received training and how confident they feel about having these conversations.
- Use of preventive coaching, using anonymized data only and in accordance with privacy agreements.
- Recurring challenges involving planning, capacity, collaboration or clarity of roles.
- Actions that have been implemented and the impact teams experience.

What NOT to do

Never use mental health indicators, coaching information or questionnaire results as an individual performance assessment tool. Doing so damages trust and is not necessary to learn and improve at organizational level.

7. Practical check for HR professionals and managers

Use these questions to assess where your organization currently stands. Consider both your policies and what happens in everyday practice.

1	Do managers know which changes in behavior may be a reason to start a conversation?
2	Can employees access support before they need to call in sick?
3	Is it clear to everyone what support is available and how to access it?
4	Do teams regularly discuss work pressure, priorities and recovery, even when no one is currently absent due to sickness?
5	Do we look not only at the individual employee, but also at how the work is organized?
6	Are preventive coaching and confidential support clearly separated from performance assessment?
7	Do we use team-level insights to improve policy, planning or leadership?

Final thoughts

Preventing mental health-related absence does not require a perfect organization. It requires paying attention before someone is unable to work, managers who are willing to ask what is going on, and an effective route to appropriate support. MEPD helps organizations in manufacturing and engineering put this into practice through coaching, training and structural integration into their organization.

Start with an exploratory conversation

Would you like to know what the right first step is for your organization? Discuss the possibilities of the Mental Fitness Program with MEPD.

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Sources and references

The content of this whitepaper was written for MEPD. The figures in chapter 1 are based on publicly available Dutch sources. The practical approach and the three interventions are based on MEPD's Mental Fitness Program.

[1] Arboportaal, ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid. *Burn-outklachten onder werknemers blijven toenemen*. 20 april 2026, op basis van de Nationale Enquête Arbeidsomstandigheden 2025 van TNO en CBS. https://www.arboportaal.nl/actueel/nieuws/2026/04/20/burn-outklachten-onder-werknemers-blijven-toenemen

[2] Arboportaal, ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid. *Wat zegt de wet over werkdruk?*. geraadpleegd op 29 juni 2026. https://www.arboportaal.nl/onderwerpen/psychosociale-arbeidsbelasting/werkdruk/wat-zegt-de-wet

[3] TNO. *Werkdruk een van de belangrijkste arbeidsrisico's*. 11 november 2024, op basis van de Nationale Enquête Arbeidsomstandigheden, Zelfstandigen Enquête Arbeid en Werkgevers Enquête Arbeid. https://www.tno.nl/nl/newsroom/2024/11/werkdruk-belangrijkste-arbeidsrisico/

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