



SVA Zürich

**Psychological
problems mask
their true face**

A guide for managers

“SVA Zürich is your partner for prevention and occupational integration in the canton of Zurich.”

As managers, we can somehow sense that something is wrong. However, all too often we ignore that gut feeling and carry on as before. “That’s not like him at all,” you might think, or “She’s like a completely different person.” That’s precisely what the images in this guide express. Employees, perhaps even established high achievers in a team, can start to change. Psychological problems mask their true face. Employees suffering from psychological stress can be demanding and can even overburden managers. With its IV Office, SVA Zürich is your partner for prevention and occupational integration. “IV” (*Integrationsversicherung*) translates as ‘integration insurance’, and our range of services is entirely focused on prevention and integration. We support you right from the start by helping to detect mental health problems early on.

Moreover, we believe our mission is to enable you to identify and have the courage to tackle mental health problems in the workplace. This guide includes practical advice to assist you in your day-to-day management role, and we hope it’ll be like having a compass in your hand. It was developed by – and with – managers, tested in practice, and has now been expanded in this second edition.

We wish you every success when you face these challenges.

SVA Zürich



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Contents

Editorial	3
Early detection	5
<u>Realise</u>	7
<u>Review</u>	11
<u>React</u>	15
<u>Require</u>	19
<u>Remain active</u>	21
Call us	23
Give us a try	24

Early detection

Overcome the crisis with the 5 Rs

If you're ill, you inform your boss and, if necessary, go to the doctor. That seems logical, but it isn't always the case with mental illness where those affected fear stigmatisation. It's also associated with a sense of shame and fear of losing your job. People with mental illness often try to hide their suffering.

Mental illness alters people's perception and influences their behaviour. It not only puts a strain on personal relationships, but on their working life too. Their performance may also deteriorate, and it isn't uncommon for interpersonal conflicts to arise.

We give managers the courage to tackle the issue with our tried-and-tested 5 Rs guide so you can integrate early detection into your day-to-day management tasks. It's worth it: you'll maintain the team's productivity, reduce costs, and create a working environment built on trust.

Our 5 Rs guide will help you to identify problematic developments affecting employees, address them in a solution-oriented manner, and minimise their impact on the company:

- **Realise**
- **Review**
- **React**
- **Require**
- **Remain active**

To help you even further: if our guide doesn't answer all your questions, just give us a call. We can give you straightforward support free of charge.



Realise

Watch out for the first signs.

You've been noticing something odd about your employee for quite some time, or their behaviour seems to have recently changed. It's likely that a problem is developing and the person's self-control may be affected, so it's important to be aware of the signs.

What you need to do:

- Watch out for behaviours that are unfamiliar and out of character. Employees with a mental health problem can react in different ways: some may become insecure and withdrawn, while others become thin-skinned or quick-tempered.
- Evaluate their performance. Productivity often decreases, and employees become unfocused and unreliable and work at a slower pace. They can make unusual mistakes.
- Think about their behaviour in the team. Are agreements being neglected or circumvented? Has the employee behaved inflexibly or inadequately on a number of occasions? Are their reactions inappropriate?

Early warning signs

Being aware of the signals

Ability to work

- Working chaotically with frequent breaks
- Change in attitude towards – or down-right rejection of – rules and routines
- Sensitivity to criticism
- Lack of planning and structure
- Lack of flexibility
- Accumulating a lot of overtime or working fewer hours than required
- Frequent short absences
- Decline and/or fluctuations in performance
- High error rate
- Slowing down, inefficiency
- Unreliability
- Forgetfulness
- Uncertainty
- Avoidance of certain tasks/activities
- etc.

General state of mind

- Personal withdrawal
- Irritability and aggression
- Absent-mindedness
- Persistent sadness or dejection
- Mistrust
- Complaints about persecution or feeling watched
- Talking to themselves
- Insomnia, exhaustion, unexplained pain
- Restlessness or tension
- Neglect of clothing and personal hygiene
- Altered eating patterns
- Neglect of hobbies
- etc.

Psychological stress has many faces

A four-legged friend

Christina* (50) is a project manager. She loves her work and defines herself through her job. Her private life very much plays a secondary role, and she does lots of weekend work, evening work, and overtime. Her standards are high, but maintaining them is taking more and more time. Moreover, Christina's physical condition is noticeably deteriorating. Her manager steps in as a matter of urgency and openly addresses these developments. Christina reacts furiously, but despite her aggression her boss remains calm and points out the company's duty of care: she can no longer accept this amount of overtime being done. She asks Christina to go for a check-up with her doctor, and the results are a bit of a shock: the 50-year-old realises she's heading for a breakdown. Something has to change, so she seeks help and turns her life around – starting with her diet. She gets a rescue dog to encourage her to exercise, but her four-legged friend has a much greater impact: Christina meets another dog owner and the two of them fall in love!

*Name changed



Review

Make a note of your observations.

Your experience and gut feeling tell you that your concern for the employee is justified. It's clear to you that things can't go on like this. Get a comprehensive picture of the situation, review the information and put it in writing. This gives you the confidence to take the next steps.

What you need to do:

- Be specific. Make a note of your observations. Where do performance and behaviour deviate from expectations?
- Be focused. What do you think is the biggest problem in relation to work?
- Formulate your objective as a manager: what would you like to achieve together with the employee?
Is a feedback meeting – with constructive criticism – called for?
- Decide which people in the company need to know about your assessment and what support you need.
What is the company's stance, and what is possible?

Checklist

Preparing for the meeting with the employee

The following checklist will help you to prepare properly for the meeting with the employee. It will help you to feel confident and prevent you from straying off the subject during the meeting.

Preparation

- What's my attitude, and what thoughts and emotions do I have?
- Do I want this meeting? What resistance do I feel?
- Do I have compassion for this person? Is compassion helpful in this situation?
- Have I formulated my objective and a concise justification for it in writing?
- Is the objective achievable in the given situation?
- Have I chosen the right time and place for the meeting?
- Am I prepared for a difficult reaction from my employee? People react differently to bad news. Roughly speaking, four reaction patterns can be distinguished, although someone may react differently from the usual pattern in exceptional circumstances. Be prepared for all eventualities.

The self-controlled, matter-of-fact type

Recommendation: Probe and invite the person to respond. Check whether your message has been received and discuss further concrete steps.

The deflecting, negotiating type

Recommendation: Stay on topic and establish a clear framework. Make clear, short statements. Show understanding, but don't make any promises.

The shocked, helpless type

Recommendation: Show understanding. Remain matter-of-fact. Address the reaction. Highlight the objective.

The quick-tempered, accusatory type

Recommendation: Stay calm and don't become emotional. Don't take aggression personally. Address the emotion, and if necessary insist on keeping things calm. Give the person time to process what they've heard. Stick to the facts and repeat them. Set boundaries.

Psychological stress has many faces

Working from home as a solution

For the past five years, Markus* (32) has been working full-time in the accounts department of an international company headquartered in Zurich. He does an excellent job and is popular and well adjusted. However, all that changes when he becomes a father: he constantly seems tired, tense and depressed. Mistakes pile up, and his manager is worried. Personally as well as professionally, she thinks a lot of Markus. She speaks frankly to him about his situation. Markus has nothing to say for himself and seems demoralised. His manager demonstrates understanding, but is persistent. As the meeting progresses, it turns out that Markus feels torn between work and family life. The solution that's proposed is a success: the company sets up a home office for him. In future, he'll be able to work from home one day a week, so he can spend his lunch break and the two hours saved on commuting with his family. The 32-year-old is soon his old self.

*Name changed



React

Create clarity during the meeting with the employee

Expressing concern or criticism can be tough. However, a frank and constructive meeting provides an opportunity to react and interrupt the downward spiral at work. In a situation characterised by shame and fear, this can give the person a sense of security. Nevertheless, the first reaction may be defensiveness, anger or tears. Dedicate enough time to the meeting and prepare for it in writing: what is your objective?

What you need to do:

- Start the conversation by being clear and sympathetic: "I'm worried about you. I'll tell you what I've observed and what I expect. My goal for this meeting is for us to find a good solution together."
- Demonstrate your interest in the employee. Make it clear that you want to keep them in their role.
- Report what exactly you've observed and ask about the employee's experiences. An open approach and an understanding tone will facilitate a dialogue.
- Agree on some concrete first steps: what needs to improve at work before the next meeting? Set the date for the follow-up meeting. The ideal time is 14 days after the initial meeting.

Guidelines to help you lead the discussion with confidence

The following guidelines take you through the meeting with the employee, giving you the confidence to get your messages across and initiate the necessary changes.

Welcoming the employee

- **Posture:** upright, facing the other person, making eye contact
- **Introduction:** reason for – and objective of – the meeting
- **Avoid:** small talk, questions about their well-being, highlighting of positive aspects

Naming the problem

- **Message:** address the problem or poor behaviour
- **Reason:** keep it short, stick to the essentials
- **Language:** simple, clear, short sentences
- **Avoid:** long, overly detailed explanations, euphemisms, or highlighting of positive aspects

Picking up on the reaction

- **Assessment of the employee:** invite a reaction and respect it
- **Emotions:** allow and respect them; show understanding but don't agree
- **Avoid:** comforting, appealing, justifying, mitigating, discussing

Finding a solution

- **Objective:** clearly defined
- **Solution:** involve the employee
- **Support:** offer (if possible and desired)
- **Avoid:** coercion, delegating tasks or responsibilities to others who aren't directly involved

Agreeing how to proceed

- **Measures:** clearly define and assign
- **Record:** what needs to be done by whom, and when
- **Schedule:** arrange a follow-up meeting

Winding up the employee meeting

- **Agreement:** obtain the employee's consent; demand personal responsibility
- **Summary:** give feedback on the meeting and briefly summarise it
- **Avoid:** ending too abruptly, introducing new aspects

Psychological stress has many faces

A gifted problem-solver, but not a leader

Beat* (42) has been head of department at an engineering firm for just over a year when another company buys the business. He's allowed to stay, and even leads a larger team now. However, some initial problems quickly become apparent: unanswered emails, missed deadlines, a bad mood. Beat's new manager decides to talk to him and asks about the unanswered emails and missed deadlines. There's no reaction, but his boss insists. After plenty of probing, Beat admits he's feeling overwhelmed. He suggests he needs a break. His boss supports him in this, and Beat takes a sabbatical. Everything is better when he returns, but after a few weeks it's back to square one. The manager has to act. He seeks support from HR to explore what options he has. His guess: Beat isn't comfortable with his managerial duties. Nevertheless, the 42-year-old is keen to hold on to his management role and it takes some external coaching to convince him to let go. He relinquishes his position as head of department and takes on a senior technical role. Work is fun again!

*Name changed



Require

Get things moving.

Schedule the follow-up meeting so it takes place soon after the initial discussion. The employee may be unable to stick to agreements if they have a serious mental health condition. The point now is to create a sense of security and require concrete action.

What you need to do:

- Refer to the previous meeting: "We agreed to meet again. We decided what specifically needs to change. Unfortunately that hasn't worked out. How have you been since we last spoke?"
- Show understanding and then clarify the company's position. Set out what is expected in terms of behaviour.
- Does an external expert need to get involved to deliver sustainable change? Tell the employee they need to seek help (e.g. from a doctor) and explain why. Ask them to authorise this person to inform you about the employee's ability to cope with pressure. In this way you can assess whether - and how - they can work while undergoing any treatment.
- It's important that the expert should be aware of how the employee is perceived within the company.
- At the end of the meeting, summarise the steps that have been agreed and decide when you'll meet next.



Remain active

Give regular feedback.

Don't expect change overnight – not even within a month. It's important that you should remain active now. Employees with mental health problems are often insecure and need lots of support from managers. Meet regularly for feedback sessions and show that your door is always open, but don't ask how they're doing every day. People on the road to recovery don't want to be constantly reminded of their illness.

What you need to do:

- Continue to record your observations in writing. Give feedback on developments. Pick up on the positive aspects and intervene if agreements aren't kept.
- Acknowledge any constructive change. Your management style must be clear, thoughtful and consistent.
- Even once their performance and behaviour are back on track, you should stay alert and keep an eye on things. In this way you'll recognise problematic developments early on and can act quickly.

Staying active as a manager also means getting support when needed. This may be from the experts in your own company or the IV specialists at SVA Zürich.

Minor adjustments, but a major impact Flexibility can allow people to stay in their job

Despite their illness, adaptations to the working environment and the tasks required can often help people to remain in their role. Which adjustments make sense will depend on the specific situation. A discussion with the person who's treating the employee can shed some light on this. Possible options include the following:

- Reduce the workload
- Simplify tasks
- Structure tasks more clearly
- Reduce the number of tasks that require planning
- Arrange more frequent short breaks
- Offer a calm working environment
- Allow the person to work independently
- Provide weekly feedback

Call us

Sometimes you need a bit more support.

Mental illness in the workplace can be a challenge for even the most experienced managers. When dealing with any given case, it can be very helpful to get the opinion of external experts. Our IV specialists can give you straightforward support free of charge. We can advise you on the phone or visit you in person if you prefer.

Our website provides more information on how we can support employers and insured persons when it comes to issues relating to prevention and occupational integration.

Contact number for employers' questions:

Direct dial 044 448 58 58

Give us a try

Do you know about our prevention offers for employers?

Dealing with employees suffering from psychological stress is a challenge for managers. We provide you with tools for your day-to-day management so you can recognise problematic developments and react in a professional manner.

We organise forums at SVA Zürich. However, we can also provide customised support and join with you to design leadership workshops at your company. Would you like to make your management staff fit for the challenges they face? Our website offers information on various training courses on prevention:

www.svazurich.ch/praevention

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