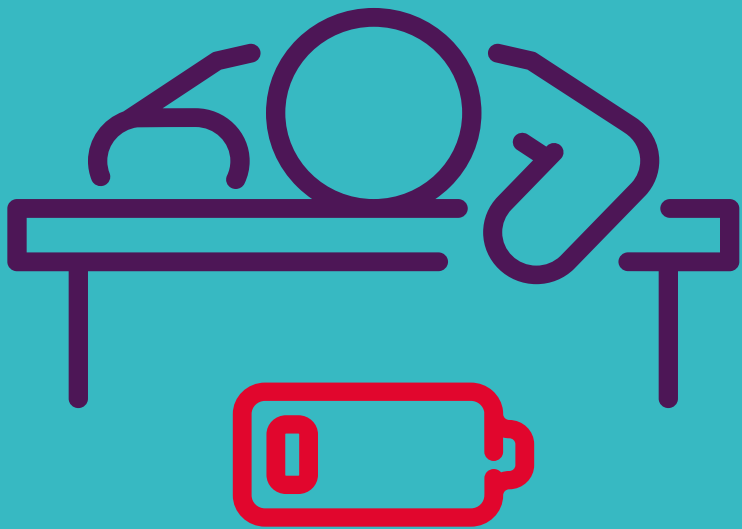


# Prevention of stress and burnout

External Service for Prevention & Protection

securex 





One in three employees complains about stress at work. In 2021, over 35,000 employees were absent for more than one year due to burnout. That represents an increase of 40% in five years (source: RIZIV- National Institute for Sickness and Disability Insurance).

As a manager and an employer, it is advisable to watch out for stress at work and the risk of burnout. After all, the costs associated with the absence of staff owing to burnout can be high. The workload of present colleagues increases, which may lead to a fall in motivation, a worse atmosphere and a higher staff turnover. When an organisation implements a policy on stress and burnout, this can result in a substantial gain in terms of productivity, motivation and initiative.

Time to turn the tide. Moreover, Belgium has a clear legal framework calling for employers to focus on stress and burnout prevention.

This brochure is intended to provide the most important insights for you as a manager and employer regarding stress and burnout and ways of integrating these into a successful policy.

# WHAT IS STRESS?

## ACUTE STRESS · CHRONIC STRESS · BURNOUT

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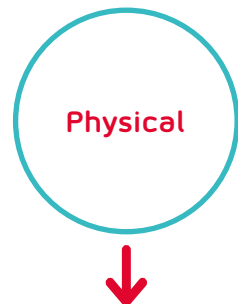
### From stress...

Experiencing acute stress is in itself not negative. It offers us a moment of **increased energy**, so that at exciting and challenging times we take action and gain focus. Therefore stress can prove very useful when danger is lurking or we want to meet a deadline.

However, when we experience long-term stress, we use up a lot of energy, it becomes increasingly difficult to **recover**. This takes us into a danger zone where **healthy stress switches to unhealthy stress** and a neurohormonal disruption occurs in the body, bringing about multiple complaints.

### Signs of stress

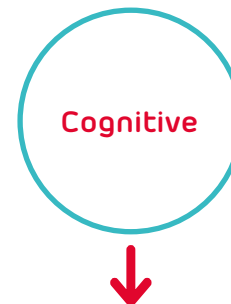
It is important to learn to recognise signs of stress.



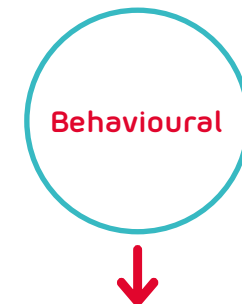
Primarily sleeping disorders (and chronic fatigue because sleep fails to prove rejuvenating) and muscle tension with spinepain (back, neck). Impaired appetite, stomach pain, headache, nausea, dizziness and sudden weight loss or gain may also occur. According to some authors, burnout can also weaken the immune system (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2007).



Anxiety, irritability, nervous tension, depressive mood, lethargy, etc. may also turn up. The individual concerned may also be apathetic and experience no emotion whatsoever.



The capacity to process information is reduced (concentration, difficulty carrying out various tasks at the same time, putting things into perspective, taking decisions, disrupted memory). These cognitive impairments might also lead to mistakes being made.



Cynicism, indifference, reduced empathy, isolation, reduced frustration tolerance leading to aggressive behaviour, decline in motivation, withdrawal, lower self-esteem, addictive behaviour (self-medication to be able to perform well at work again (amphetamines, cocaine)).



## ... to burnout

The Superior Health Council defines burnout as exhaustion as a result of a (long-term) lack of balance between the commitment given by an individual and what they receive in return. This leads to a structural imbalance between employees' load-bearing strength and their workload.

### We distinguish four core symptoms of burnout:

- 1 exhaustion (physical and mental)
- 2 mental distance (mentally withdrawing from work)
- 3 cognitive disruption (such as memory problems, impaired concentration)
- 4 emotional disruption (such as intense emotional reactions or apathy, depressive feelings)

It is important for organisations to seize the opportunity to invest in sustainable people management and strengthen the energy givers.



# PREVENTING STRESS AND BURNOUT COMPLAINTS: WHAT SHOULD YOU FOCUS ON?

## Organisational characteristics

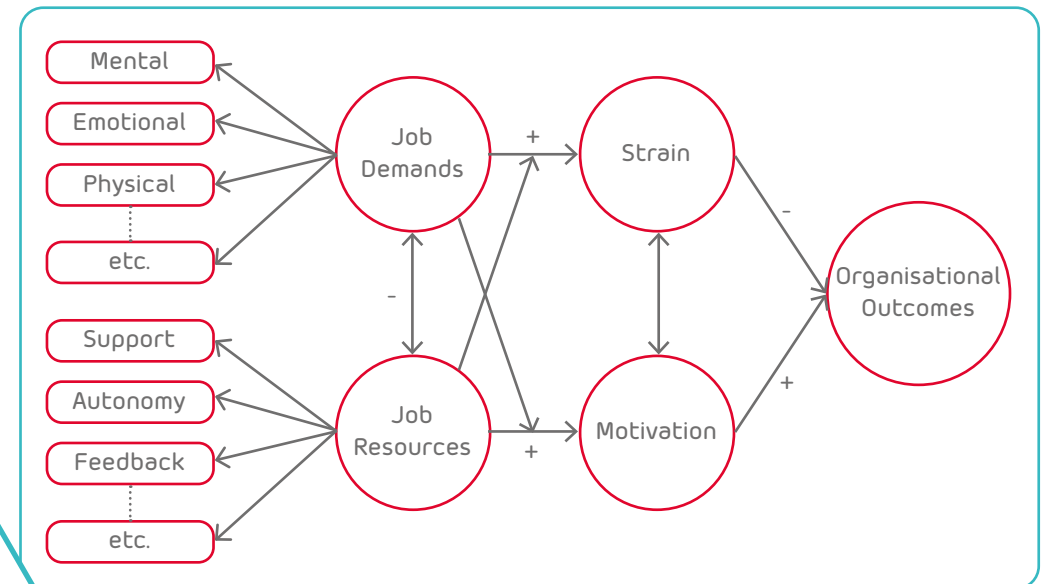
The Job Demands-Resources Model, or JD-R model, is a model that promotes well-being among staff and identifies the possible **sources of stress**. It is used by managers and supervisors to manage staff involvement. The Job Demands-Resources Model suggests that stress comes from an **imbalance between the workload** (e.g. what someone has to process) **of the job and the load-bearing strength** (e.g. what someone can handle psychologically) of the employee to offset the burden. So it is far more complex than simply a case of 'too much work'.

The model divides the working conditions into two components: **energy givers** (Job resources) **and energy guzzlers** (Job demands). The model also shows that when the energy givers are scarce and the energy guzzlers are overly present, factors such as stress and the risk of burnout will increase. If the energy givers and the energy guzzlers are balanced, then factors such as involvement and performance levels increase. To keep the balance, not only must the energy guzzlers be restricted, but the energy givers must be strengthened.

**Example:** John has a tight deadline to meet. In addition, he feels he gets little emotional support from this manager. He also experiences uncertainty, as he does not know exactly what he has to do and on top of that, fifty emails per day come in, that have to be answered.

Mark faces the same tight deadline, but he is able to work on this undisturbed and he has received clear and constructive feedback from his manager on the first version of his report. Despite the fact that John and Mark need to cope with the same tight deadline, the stress levels of the two will be very different.

Together with your staff, you can look into what are energy givers and energy guzzlers for them, respond to them and make adjustments to re-establish the balance.



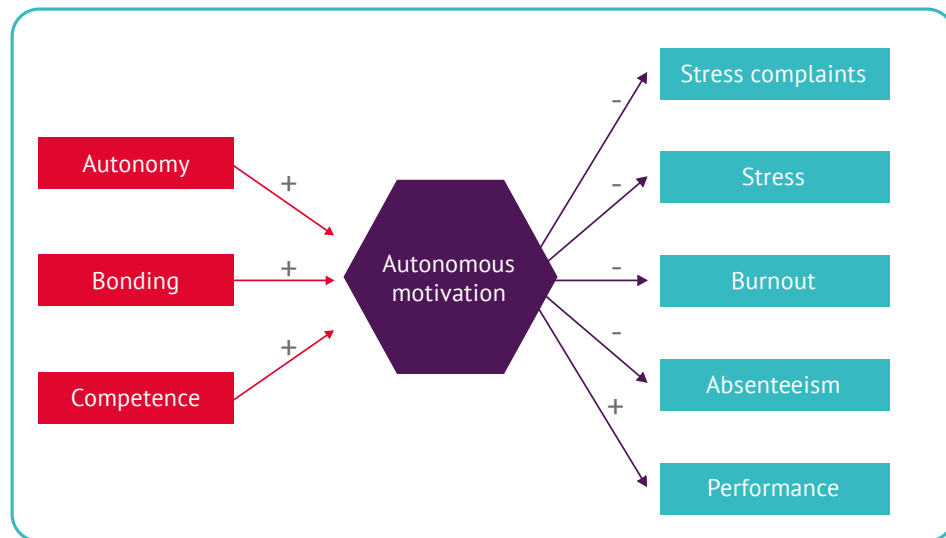
Source: Demerouti, E.; Bakker, A.B.; Nachreiner, F.; Schaufeli, W.B. (2001)

## The ABC model: the importance of autonomous motivation

While one employee does his best to meet the high expectations of his boss, another will be strongly motivated because he is passionate about his work. The **Self-Determination** theory developed by Deci & Ryan states that it is important for motivation to be highly qualitative and 'autonomous'.

A leadership style that focuses on autonomy, involvement and competency development appears to be one of the most important energy givers to boost autonomous motivation in people. As a manager, you can do this by giving staff the feeling that they have control over their own behaviour and goals, ensuring that you help identify the skills and assist with the development of the competencies they need for success, and enabling a feeling of connection with other people.

We also note that people who are autonomously motivated want to work longer, are absent for shorter periods and less frequently and experience less stress, stress complaints and burnout.



Source: Securex focus report (2017): 'Quality of motivation determines the age to which you want to work'

## Personal characteristics

To speak of a burnout, the causes should be related to work.

However, an interaction with the context and personal vulnerabilities is often the case. Those with certain personality traits, such as perfectionists, yes-men and people pleasers, run an increased risk of burnout, certainly when combined with a heavy workload.

As a manager, it is best to try to resist the temptation to call mainly on people with a highly developed sense of responsibility, who find it difficult to say no. Help them to guard their own boundaries as well, because they are typically not particularly good at that. In the short term, you may benefit from asking them to do more than other colleagues, but in the long term it is better to help them to keep an eye on their limits.

Negative and invasive life events (such as divorce, death in the family, financial worries, etc.) also play a role in experiencing stress at work. Even if, as a manager, you cannot do anything about the cause, a supportive reaction can work wonders.

## Disconnecting

The times in which we live have brought an extra challenge for brain workers. They are constantly connected and accessible. However, this does not always lead to a better output or higher productivity. As an employer, it is important to respect the right to disconnect by not expecting staff to be constantly reachable. In addition, create a work context in which people can focus on their brain work without having to continuously switch between tasks.

This can be done by setting an example as a manager and encouraging people to disconnect for certain periods in order to increase concentration. It may help to provide work spaces for focusing, suitable areas where people can sit in silence or rooms where they can consult with colleagues and thus increase productivity.

# WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY?

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Developing a preventive stress and burnout policy produces a great many positive effects and is essential in every modern organisation. Moreover, implementing this policy is a legal requirement.

*Source: Act of 28 February 2014, supplementing the act of 4 August 1996 on the well-being of employees, and Code on well-being at work, Book I, Title 3 on the prevention of psychosocial risks at work.)*

## The legislator determines the general framework for the prevention of psychosocial risks at work.



Psychosocial risks are described in law as the probability that one or more employees will experience psychological damage which may or may not be accompanied by physical injury, as a result of exposure to elements of the work organisation, the job content, the employment conditions, the working conditions and interpersonal relations at work, which the employer has an impact on and which objectively entail a danger.

Employers are therefore obliged to adopt a **general prevention policy** in the organisation. This means that an analysis of the psychosocial risks has to be carried out, after which an action plan should be drawn up, as well as an annual evaluation and adjustment of this action plan. This risk analysis should be carried out with the cooperation of the staff. Taking this step in a preventive policy gives you an insight into the risk factors and the number of people experiencing psychosocial discomfort.

In the context of the **risk analysis**, the employer identifies the situations that may give rise to psychosocial risks at work. He defines and assesses the psychosocial risks at work, bearing in mind the dangers associated with the below-mentioned Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

Job content



refers to all intrinsic aspects of a job (information, variation, use of skills, role conflicts, emotional-, physical-, private- and cognitive demands)

Working relationships



refers to all mutual interpersonal relations, both positive and negative, within the work context (confidence in manager, team and colleagues, transgressive behaviour)

Employment conditions



relates to the terms of employment (professional development, career paths and work intensity)

Working conditions



refers to the conditions (i.e. the physical working environment) in which a staff member does his job

Work organisation



refers to the adequacy with the company's strategy, autonomy, management, change policy and job security.

In addition, the employer should provide an **internal procedure** for staff who are confronted with a psychosocial risk and who want to contact the internal confidant or the prevention advisor for psychosocial well-being (mandatory).

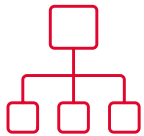
In cases of **stress complaints**, too, the employee can consult the confidant or the prevention advisor for psychosocial wellbeing in complete confidence for a listening ear, support, advice or a referral to an external source of help. It is therefore advisable to inform staff clearly of their role and contact details. Make sure that this is an accessible contact for staff (see below for the contact details of the prevention advisor)



# INTEGRATED POLICY FOR YOUR ORGANISATION

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An integrated policy requires an approach in various fields. It is important to focus on preventing stress and burnout complaints, on broadening knowledge and on interventions for those who experience these stress complaints. Only a combination of these three approaches will have a lasting effect.



Prevention aims to avoid stress factors and strengthen sources of energy. A risk analysis, as described above, can be a starting point to identify important factors.



These results can be examined in more depth in terms of quality by organising workshops or arranging individual interviews within particular demographic groups that positively or negatively stood out in the results of the analysis. This information can be used to draw up an action plan.



It is important to sharpen awareness and add knowledge and skills around this topic for both management and staff. Subjects on which awareness can be increased: what is stress and burnout, recognising signs of stress, influencing factors (energy guzzlers and energy givers), the role of the work context, personal risks, do's and don'ts and resources.

In addition, a stress management training can create a sense of a better balance when dealing with stress by providing exercises and tools.

Interventions are the services aimed at staff members or teams who are already in the 'risk zone'. They can be offered support and guidance by an external prevention advisor for psychosocial aspects.

This can also be organised internally by appointing a coach in the organisation or calling upon the internal prevention advisor. In addition, you can join institutions that offer professional help for staff.





# 10 TIPS

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1

As an employer or manager it is important to set a **good example**. Take care of yourself, plan a sufficient number of breaks, take time to disconnect from work and make sure staff see this.

2

In addition, it is important that you **create space, adopt an open attitude and listen**. During individual consultations, don't only inquire about operational matters, but also show an interest in their mental health. Ask questions about work pressure, when your staff experience a loss of energy and where they get energy from.

3

As a manager or an employer, be **alert to signs** (as described above) from colleagues or staff. Dare to bring these up for discussion, regardless of whether a solution is readily available. In addition, you can also watch out for absences.

4

Encourage people to schedule **breaks**. Help ensure that time is set aside for staff to recover. As a manager, encourage people to take a lunch break or a short recess together. In the short term, it may prove beneficial if staff do not take breaks, but in the long run this can have harmful consequences.

5

Give positive **feedback and acknowledgement**. People who experience stress at work often say that what they need is recognition of all the work they do. They don't want to constantly hear about things that could be done better, but also be told when things go well. Meeting these needs does not cost anything and can mean a great deal.

6

As a manager, take account of **autonomy, involvement and competence**. Make sure these needs are met as much as possible and talk about this during individual consultations.

7

If staff regularly **telework**, try to stay in contact with them as much as possible by means of individual follow-ups, or check ins (go round to see how everyone is feeling) at every meeting. That way, you know what is going on in your team.

8

Noise and constant disruptions are real energy guzzlers. Make sure that staff can perform their tasks in the **best possible working conditions**. Good for their health and efficiency.

9

If someone is absent because of stress complaints, keep **in contact** in a dosed manner.

10

It is best to prepare for a **successful return to work** during the absence itself. Make sure that the person can come back with a clear idea of the changes that have taken place as well as a clear agreement on working hours and job content.

# BEST PRACTICES FOR A SUCCESSFUL RETURN TO WORK

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## Frequency and means of staying in contact

A staff member will definitely appreciate and need involvement and support from the work context. Be aware that discussions are very tiring for someone with burnout. It is better, depending on the **recovery process** to keep all contacts very short at first (e.g. card or texts) and above all show that you are supportive. As the recovery progresses, measured amounts of information can be exchanged about the job context or you can offer to meet up for a brief chat. It may also help to explain to colleagues that someone with burnout has little energy to maintain social contacts if questions come up about this.

## Content of the contact

As an employer or manager, it is best to show **respect** for and knowledge of burnout as an illness. Point out the initiatives that are taken by the organisation. To bring about a successful re-integration, it is important to follow the **pace of the employee** without explicitly or implicitly exerting pressure as a manager.

It is also important to **show understanding** and adopt a calm, supportive attitude.

## Preparing the work resumption

When the staff member indicates that the time is right, an initial discussion can be scheduled with the focus on the health of the staff member. In the subsequent meetings, your role as a manager/ employer can be discussed and energy givers and energy guzzlers can be identified. Look into whether a temporary change in the work context or another job is necessary and draw up a plan accordingly. Be sure to involve colleagues in the return to work.

## Ready to return to work

We recommend a **warm welcome**, with just the information necessary to be able to work for the next few days. In the following weeks, the staff member will need additional consultation times to steadily receive more information. You can open these consultations by asking how things are evolving for the staff member at the moment and then set clearly defined goals, taking account of tasks that give energy.

The period for a resumption of the old work pattern is different for everyone. Where possible, a gradual build-up is advisable. This allows better monitoring and a smaller risk of a relapse.



# SECUREX, YOUR PARTNER FOR A STRESS AND BURNOUT POLICY

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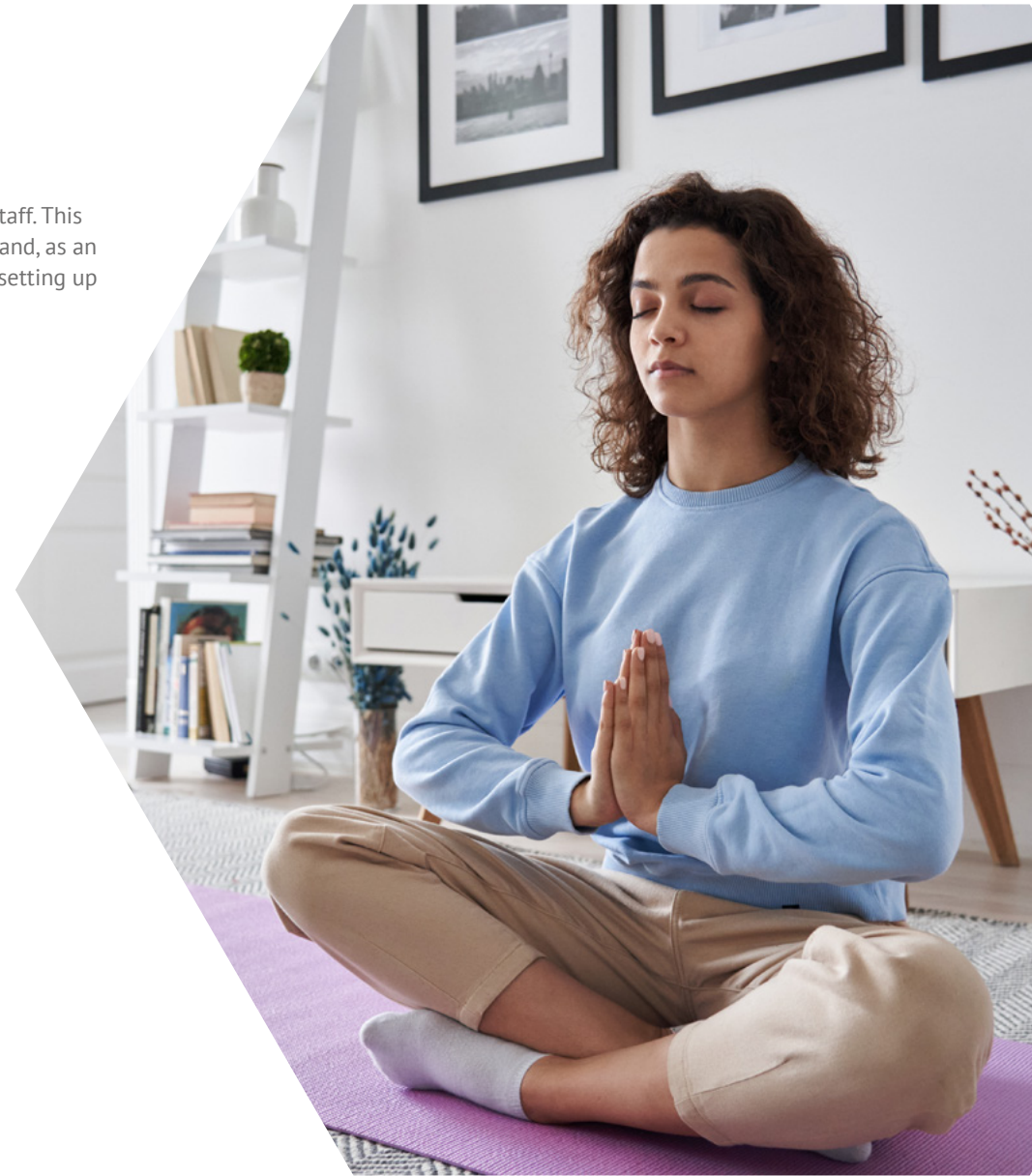
A **risk analysis of psychosocial aspects** is useful to identify the overall psychological well-being of your staff. This risk analysis can be carried out by the Securex prevention advisor for psychosocial aspects. On the one hand, as an employer you have a duty to carry this out (ideally every five years). On the other, it can be a first step in setting up a well-being policy.

A varied range of **training courses** on resilience, mental well-being, handling stress and burnout and increasing awareness is available.

Finally, the prevention advisor for psychosocial aspects can also be your partner when drawing up an **action plan or a stress and burnout policy**.

Your staff can call upon the prevention advisor for psychosocial aspects for an advisory talk in order to look for possibilities and solutions. They can contact us via the staff **support line** (0800 100 59).

The prevention advisor-occupational physician can be brought in when staff experience health worries by scheduling **medical supervision**. Both the occupational physician and the prevention advisor for psychosocial aspects can offer help with **re-integration after long-term absence**, including as a result of burnout.



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Any questions? Contact your occupational physician or the Securex psychosocial unit.

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