

# From missing the signs to structural prevention

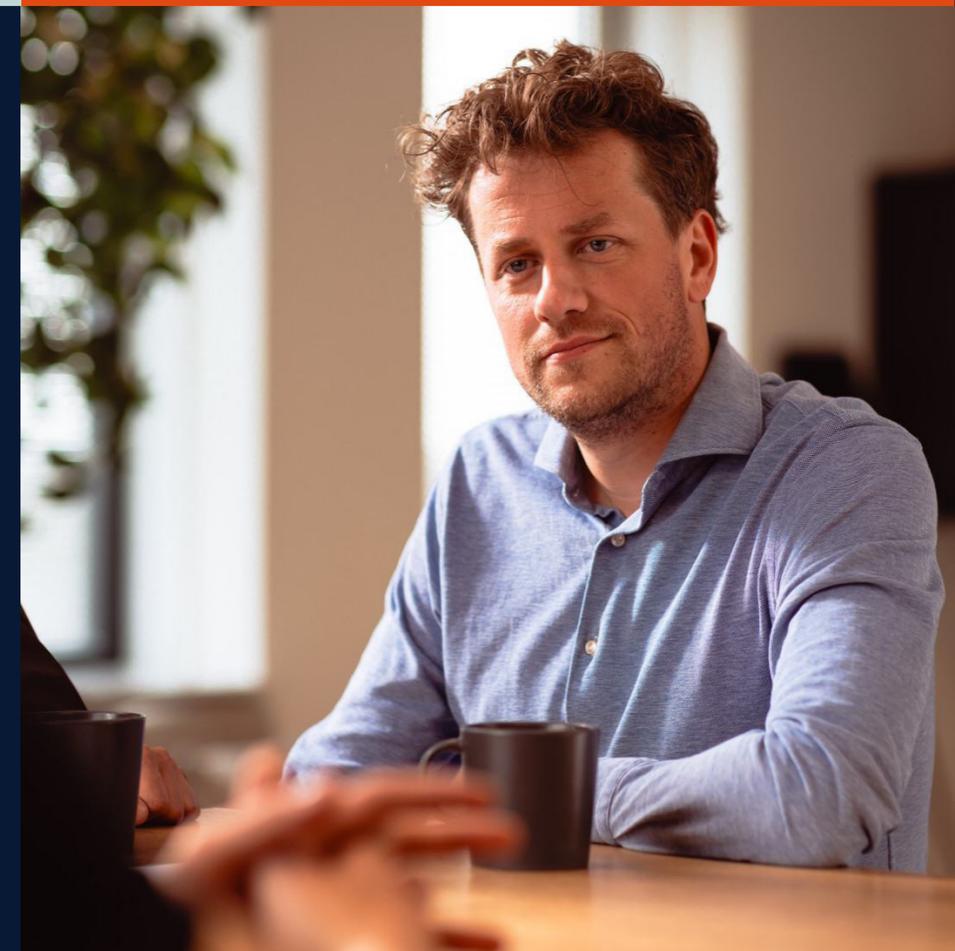
Mental health-related absence seldom happens without warning

In many cases, the signs that someone is about to take time off from work for mental health-related reasons are there months in advance. Even so, we often take action only when someone calls in sick, simply because we missed the signs, or because managers lack sufficient tools to start a conversation.

With this Orange Paper, we hope to raise awareness among employers, managers and HR professionals about the full extent of mental health-related absence. We'll help you spot the signs sooner, start a conversation in good time and focus on genuine prevention.



acture



**72 %** 72% of employees felt like they weren't well before calling in sick

**83 %** In 83% of cases, they had been feeling unwell for months

**11 %** Only 11% of these employees said they had a manager that expressed their concern

**34 %** 34% of employees do not feel safe enough to start a conversation about mental health issues

*The figures in this Orange Paper are taken from a recent study carried out by research agency Highberg in the spring of 2025 on behalf of Acture (unless stated otherwise) among Dutch employees. All figures, law and regulations are based on the Dutch market.*

Mental health-related absence comes at a cost: for the employee who's off sick, for colleagues who need to take over their workload, and for the organisation as a whole. And that raises a few what ifs: could you, as a manager, have spotted the signs sooner? Could you have prevented the employee from calling in sick?

Because that's where you stand to gain. By stepping in as soon as you spot the first signs, it's often possible to prevent long periods off work, while there's still time to make adjustments.

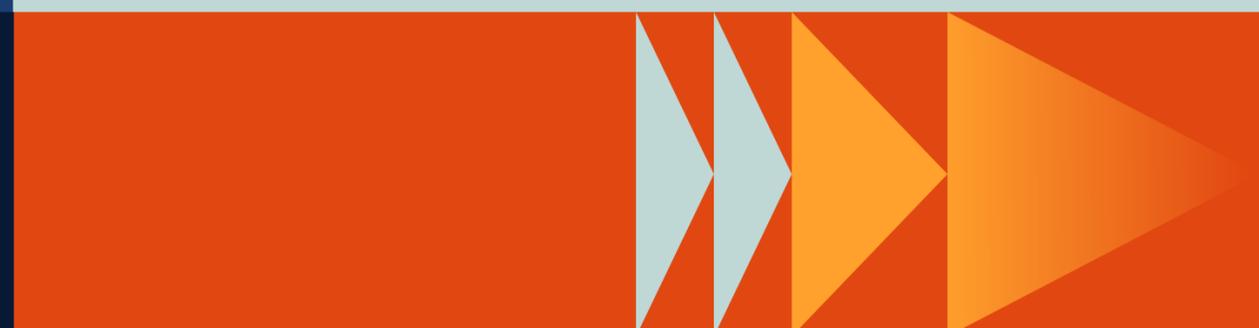
Spotting the signs early starts with becoming aware of the issue. You need to know what mental health-related absence is, and you need to recognise when someone's mental health is out of balance. And as an organisation, you need to create the right conditions so that employees feel confident to speak up.

By taking action in good time, you will prevent long-term sickness absence, retain employees, and create a healthy workplace. And that requires a shift in thinking, with a focus on prevention. That's why we're sharing this Orange Paper. We'll show you that prevention works, and that there is much to be gained, for everyone concerned.

## Why prevention is essential

The figures certainly don't lie:

- 1** 25-30% of all sick leave days are taken for mental health-related reasons
- 2** 43% of the working population has taken time off work for mental health-related reasons at some point
- 3** 10% only managed a full return to work after a year off
- 4** 1 in 5 people start looking for another job after taking time off for mental health-related reasons



## What exactly is mental health-related absence?

Mental health-related absence means that an employee is temporarily unable to work due to mental health issues. This may vary from mild stress to severe mental health disorders. Examples include stress-related symptoms, feeling overwhelmed, processing a bereavement, difficulties setting boundaries and anxiety issues — much more than just burnout or depression, in other words.

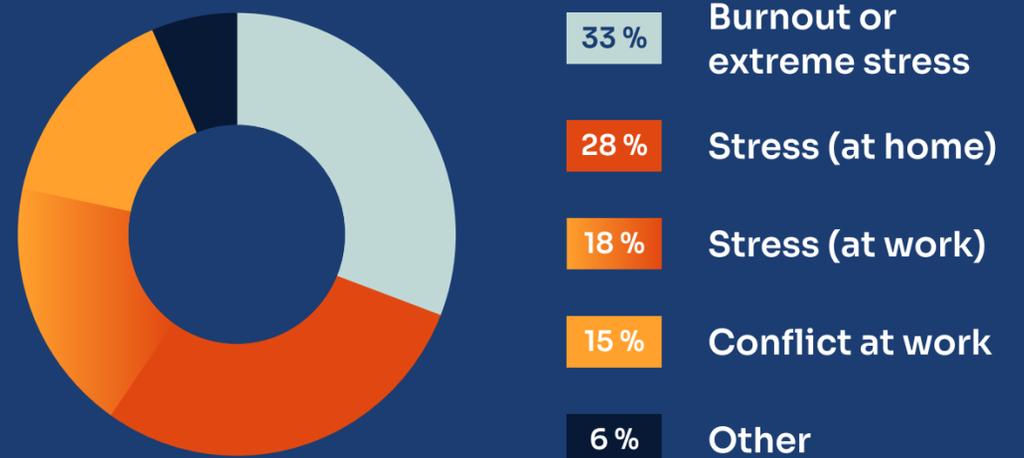
**'In many cases, there's no medical cause to speak of. Instead, people are finding a way forward after something has changed in their life. They ask themselves: who am I, what am I able to do, and how do I set boundaries?'**  
– Roel Cuijpers, ArdoSZ director

Occupational health specialists speak of an imbalance between the resilience of an employee and the burden their work and life places on them. When that balance is disturbed over the long term, problems will follow. And if you fail to recognise or acknowledge these problems, sickness absence will follow. The good news is that our data reveals that it's often much easier to provide support to this group of people than we think. According to Roel Cuijpers: 'They've reached a temporary impasse. What helps in these instances is that you take action quickly, are open to conversations about work and their private life, and offer practical and other tools to address their issues.'

Did you know that as an employer, you are obliged to inform your employees about the possible mental pressure that comes with the jobs you offer if 'psychosocial workload' has been identified as an issue in your RI&E? Teach your employees what mental pressure is, how to recognise it, what you're doing to support them and what they can do themselves.

## Causes of mental health-related absence

In 70% to 80% of employees going on sick leave, there's no medical cause. Employees with mental health issues struggle with:



## Why the system isn't working yet

Four out of five employees with mental health or chronic issues continue working regardless, even though 40% of those employees are unable to do their job properly.\* And that says something about our culture and our attitude towards work. We love nothing more than to roll up our sleeves and get things done, without complaining.

- 16% of employees call in sick when they are experiencing stress at work
- For depression, that figure is a little higher: 35%
- For a burnout, 69% of employees raise the alarm

**On top of that, not everyone feels safe discussing their problems: 34% of employees find it really awkward to start a conversation about mental health issues.**

We see 'keep calm and carry on' as something of a strength. But that makes it difficult to ask for help. As a result, our absence policies only kick in once someone has called in sick — and for mental health-related absence, that's simply too late. By the time these employees call in sick, they have often been pushing themselves beyond their limits for a long time.

Many forms of mental health-related absence can be avoided with the right type of prevention. But as Roel Cuijpers, ArdoSZ director, acknowledges, that's exactly where the main challenge lies:

**'Managers are hardly ever trained to recognise the signs. Taking a proactive approach toward the wellbeing of your colleagues is asking a lot of managers, especially when that's not their core task. And in some settings, such as healthcare, these conversations often take place in a team context. One-on-one contact remains limited in these cases, even though that's exactly where the signs are easiest to spot. We have a long way to go still before prevention becomes the norm.'**



## The three main obstacles managers face when it comes to prevention

- Lack of knowledge
- Lack of time
- Lack of tools

*'I was working as a manager, but I never saw the regional manager. There was a complete lack of support, and most important of all: I didn't feel valued'*

**– Anonymous employee quote**

\* Acture (2024). When do employees in the Netherlands call in sick?

## The key role managers play

As a manager, you serve as the main link in the chain when it comes to spotting the early signs of mental health problems. Even so, you're often in the dark when it comes to knowing how to deal with employees facing these types of issues. Without the necessary knowledge and guidelines, it's hard to recognise when someone's mental health is out of balance.

And that's where tools come in handy. Have conversations about workload and wellbeing on a regular basis, not only when things are starting to get out of hand. Offering the space needed for employees themselves to reflect on the stress they are experiencing and their ability to cope is also never a bad idea.

**'My manager should have noticed that I wasn't looking well. I was tired, more quiet and more withdrawn than usual. The enthusiasm and energy I usually had were completely gone.'** – Anonymous employee quote



## As a manager, ask yourself:

Would you notice if someone on your team was about to call in sick?

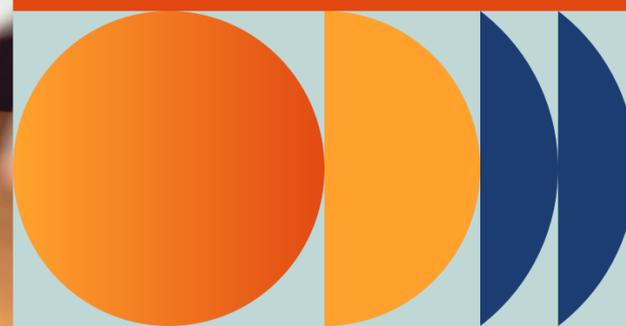
## Signs of mental health problems

### Your employee:

- Starts missing deadlines
- Is rushing or restless
- Is more irritable
- Is lacking a sense of self-awareness more often
- Gives up under pressure
- Finds it more difficult to distinguish between major and minor issues
- Feels like you're asking too much of them
- Regularly calls in sick (for short periods)

**Want to read more about what you can do when you recognise these signs in an employee?**

**[Check out our Signs Card](#) →**



## Tips and tools for managers and employees

You need to go about things the right way if you are to spot the signs early and take action quickly. These tools will help you do just that. As a manager, they'll help you see what's required of you.

And as an employee, they'll help you realise sooner when you're not feeling your best and you could do with a little support.

### → Signs Card

Recognise the signs of mental health issues in your employees. Learn what action to take next. How do you start a conversation, for example?

### → Self Check

How do you motivate your employees to work on their mental health themselves? Our Self Check actively helps them reflect on their mental wellbeing, so you can start a conversation when necessary.

### → Workshops

Did you know we offer workshops and (bespoke) training courses for managers on the topics of prevention and mental health absence?

*'Prevention is not an added extra.  
It's part of being a leader. It's part of  
being a good employer.'*

**- Roel Cuijpers**

ArdoSZ director





Evermood is the most complete wellbeing platform around for employees. As an HR professional or manager, you want to support your employees and stay one step ahead of sickness absence. Through coaching, practical tips and online workshops, you can bolster your employees precisely when they most need this.

#### Evermood offers a wealth of videos, exercises and events to help you:

- Properly assess the situation
- Take constructive action
- Make help more accessible

#### Employees can find the support they need themselves through:

- One-on-one coaching by professional coaches, psychologists and trainers
- Online workshops
- A media library containing expert and accessible information about a wide range of health topics, from lifestyle and finance to dealing with change, informal care, bereavements or career development

## Outcome:

- 1 30% more satisfied with employer on average**
- 2 Employees use Evermood 25% more than traditional programmes**
- 3 Spotting the signs early and preventive support can lead to a 10-15% drop in sickness absence**

## Real-life example: Bergman Clinics

Bergman Clinics has recently adopted the Evermood wellbeing platform to preventively support its employees in relation to mental and physical wellbeing.

According to Vincent Bakker, the manager of Evermood, this partnership falls perfectly in line with the shift many organisations are now making from a reactive absence policy to a proactive focus on prevention and helping employees to thrive at work. 'Over the past few years, we've seen more and more organisations focusing on prevention,' Bakker explains. 'Instead of only springing into action when an employee calls in sick, they want to spot the signs sooner and offer support. Evermood offers an easily accessible and versatile platform to help them do exactly that.' Like elsewhere, Bergman Clinics previously dealt with employee absence on a case-by-case basis. As a result, it was often too late to make a difference. 'With Evermood, Bergman Clinics gets to take action sooner when it comes to prevention — and that gives them an even better chance of preventing sickness absence.'

Thanks to Evermood, prevention has now become a structural element of HR policy at Bergman Clinics. Employees can access the platform at any time of day for anonymous access to coaching, practical tips, online workshops and other forms of support. In turn, offline activities and initiatives can be developed based on the data generated by the platform. 'On top of that, the platform not only supports employees, but it also helps managers when it comes to having conversations,' says Bakker. 'And that contributes to a safe and healthy workplace environment.'

The initial reaction to Bergman Clinics using Evermood has been positive. 'We understand that employees appreciate having easy and anonymous access to suitable support.'

## What can you do today?

Want to get a grip on mental health-related absence?  
Start with the small steps that have the biggest impact:

Be open to conversations about mental health

Use the [Signs Card](#)

Talk to your colleagues

Share the [Self Check](#) on your team

Explore the options [Evermood](#) offers

By spotting the signs earlier, listening better and taking action sooner, we can help create a healthy workplace.

**Together, we can get a grip on  
mental health-related absence.**



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For more information or to find out what Acture can do for your organisation, please contact us. We look forward to working with you.

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