

Stress treatment that will increase resilience in the organizational context during and after treatment

More and more organizations have established a performance culture to create higher efficiency and lower sickness absenteeism. However, all Danish statistics show that more and more Danes suffer from stress. This has been confirmed by the National Research Center for the Working Environment (NFA) that have asked 35,000 Danes about their working environment. In 2012, 14.5 percent of the employed Danes suffered from what NFA refers to as 'severe psychological stress and symptoms'. In 2016, the percentage had increased to 16.9 percent¹. According to the Global Corporate Challenge study, that followed more than 1.5 million employees in Europe over a 12-year period, 63 percent of the stressed employees reported a productivity above average, while fully 87 percent of the employees that were not stressed reported a productivity above average. The same study also show that the stressed employees reported a high degree of fatigue. More and more people suffer from stress, and hence, more and more people are in risk of experiencing relapse. That is destructive, not only to the individual, but also to the department/team, the organization, and the society. Therefore, we need to focus on a stress treatment that will create resilience during the treatment phase, but also continually strengthen our resilience for a good sustained productivity. This will be beneficial, not only for the health of the employees, but also because it will create a better bottom-line in the organizations.

In Denmark, the public authorities want to reduce stress, but currently it is going the wrong way. It takes a much greater focus on the handling of stress and build-up of handling to secure future resilience. As for the Danes that state that they have felt stressed, work is 94.9 percent of the reason. 54.4 percent states that work has been the only source to stress while 40.5 percent states that a combination of work and private matters has made them suffer from stress².

I have worked with stress treatment for 12 years. On this basis, I have created an approach that can be used in treatment and subsequently for creating persistent resilience. I have developed a phase-model, which in the first part of the phases is aimed at physiological regulation, in the second part on the employees handling strategies, and in the third and last part is aimed at the organizational context. My model is developed to focus on the neural level of the brain in an organizational context.

In this article, I will present the phase model, which I have developed and that is my foundation in my work. My goal with this article is to disseminate my experiences and my knowledge of stress treatment. The aim of stress treatment is to improve current and future resilience by strengthening the physiological and psychological handling, which I will refer to as handling strategies.

¹ Arbejdsmiljø og Helbred 2016. NFA, 2017.

² Arbejdsmiljø og Helbred 2016. NFA, 2017.

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It is my experience that if all three phases are not a part of the stress treatment, the risk of relapse or difficulties in turning back to full-time work, without experiencing stress symptoms, increases. This will further increase the risk of permanent brain injuries.³

My inspiration for phase 1 in the phase model, that deal with resting the nervous system, comes from the biological sciences of the 60's that build upon Canon's (1932) fight or flight response-system. The fight or flight response is the automatic mechanisms of the brain when it assesses a danger in a split second. During the latest years, brain research has shown what has been obvious in practice, that stress affects the functionality of the brain. Hence, this should be implicated in treatment.

I was inspired for phase 2, that deal with handling strategies, primarily from the literature of Lazarus about psychological stress, coping and cognitive assessment. Handling strategies involve both coping and cognitive assessment. My approach further stems from cognitive behavioral therapy that has shown most effective in reducing stress symptoms in relation to demands⁴. The last phase is inspired by my experience in practice and my background as a specialist in the organizational field. In my search of literature, it hasn't been possible to find any literature that systematically addresses the subject handling strategies and returning to work with the purpose of increasing future resilience after a sick leave due to stress.

My definition of stress is quite simple: "It is the response of the brain when receiving too many demands". These demands can be either psychological and/or physiological. In the short run, the stress hormones will strengthen the body to perform, but in the long run the stress hormones will slowly break down the brain's ability to function, disturb the signals between the neurons, and even break down brain cells. Certain studies have shown that the prefrontal cortex of the brain is shrinking, and hence both memory and future learning is deteriorated⁵. One of the most central stress hormones is cortisol. Cortisol is released from the adrenal glands as a part of the fight or flight response, but if we don't react to the increase of cortisol, a negative reinforcement will happen, and hence it will break down the body instead of strengthening it.

Generally, stress symptoms can be divided into physical, psychological, and behavioral symptoms. Stress can be manifested by increased absence from work (physical disease), mood swings and being less happy (psychological), as well as lack of surplus energy for performing (behavior). Stress can be detected by the most common stress symptoms, such as: frequent headaches, sleeping

³ Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne. "How stress tears us apart: Enzyme attacks synaptic molecule, leading to cognitive impairment." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 2014.

Nicole Branam . "Stress Kills Brain Cells Off." Scientific American Mind. 2007.

Yale University. "How stress and depression can shrink the brain." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 12 August 2012.

⁴ The Handbook of Stress Science. Biology, Psychology, and Health. Springer Publishing Company. Editors Contrada and Baum.

⁵ Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne. "How stress tears us apart: Enzyme attacks synaptic molecule, leading to cognitive impairment." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 2014.

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difficulties, concentration difficulties, memory difficulties, fatigue, difficulties making decisions, difficulties relaxing, reduced interest in social activities, etc. The phase model can be used no matter what degree of stress the employee is experiencing.

My phase model is illustrated here:



Phase 1 and 2 primarily focuses on the employee, while in phase 2 and 3 the organizational context is involved through the employee. The organization greatly influences what kind of handling strategies the employee needs to adjust in phase 2, because there need to be a focus in the treatment on the stress related factors in the job that are most burdening to the employee. Phase 3 deal with the employee in the organizational context. This phase focuses on the interaction between the employee and the organization, as well as regulating the organizational context.

The organizational context is the framework of the phases of stress handling. This framework is pivotal for the employee to return to work quickly. Organizations that change the framework of the employee will have the employee back working full-time quicker than those who do not. This can be done by accommodating the contents and tasks to the resources of the employee. Usually, various factors in the organizational context are affecting the employee, such as: constant changes, poor working environment, conflicts, repeatedly overtime work for a longer period of time, discrimination, new working methods, control, comprehensive documentation, lack of matching of expectations, and no time for the core task.

Calming down the nervous system

Phase 1 encompasses the activities that help the employee to calm down the nervous system. This phase is fundamental for the entire course of the treatment, and a focus on the stress-relieving activities should be maintained. This phase focuses on restoring the physiological balance. As

mentioned, stress is a physiological condition that should be treated with a physiological approach that promotes the ability of the brain to cure itself⁶.

If the employee suffers from severe stress with common stress symptoms, such as: frequent headaches, sleep disturbances, concentration difficulties, memory difficulties, fatigue, difficulties making decisions, difficulties relaxing, mood swings, reduced interest in social activities, etc. I recommend a sick leave in which the employee is temporarily taken out of the organizational context until the nervous system has been calmed down distinctively. From my experience, the employee will be rid of the stress symptoms and have achieved a calmness on the nervous system approximately one month after being taken out of the organizational context. However, this requires that the employee is 1: actively working with stress-relieving activities, 2: accepting the process, 3: secured serenity from the organization. The best result is achieved if the employee experiences as a minimum two weeks, and preferably one month, without stress symptoms.

Item 1, stress-relieving activities, covers what the employee actively can do to reduce stress physiologically. This can be relaxation, exercise, etc.⁷ If the employee is very stressed, he/she must be trained to relax through stress-relieving activities.

Regarding item 2, generally, the process of a sick leave due to stress has become difficult for employees to accept. Stress has mistakenly become a condition concerning 'weak' individuals. In relation to this, I will emphasize my definition of stress as the response of the brain when confronted with too many psychological and/or physiological demands. Hence, it is not an indicator of weakness, but an indication that the employee has not had the time to reconstitute properly. This affects both the length of the sick leave, as well as the employee's acceptance of the process.

Item 3 is relevant because the organization wants to contribute to having the employee back at work quickly, but in phase 1 and the first part of phase 2, often the employee is not ready to deal with any kind of pressure or demands. Though well-intentioned visits, calls, emails, text-messages, etc. are only attempts to be helpful, often to the employee, it is only contributing to concerns, feelings of not being good enough, and/or having to return to work fast. Hence, it is important that the leader is not doing any attempts to push the employee to return to work, but instead supports the employee to say yes or no in relation to the contact. In situations where the leader is expecting a weekly report regarding progress and returning to work, this can prolong the sick leave due to a market increase of stress symptoms.

⁶ Dr. Michael Merzenich PhD. *Soft-Wired: How the New Science of Brain Plasticity Can Change Your Life*, 2013.

⁷ *The Handbook of Stress Science. Biology, Psychology, and Health*. Springer Publishing Company. Editors Contrada and Baum.

Phase 1 is overlapping phase 2, though it is important that a marked recovery of the stress symptoms has taken place before commencing phase 2, since a stressed brain cannot develop and learn in the same way as a brain in balance⁸.

Developing new handling strategies

In phase 2, the employee gains insight into his/her present handling strategies and how they affect and help maintain the stress symptoms.

Besides physiological and psychological handling, handling strategies can generally be divided into cognition⁹ and behavior¹⁰. Handling strategies are independent of learning style, values and personality, though these factors affect our handling strategies.

A handling strategy is the way we handle the situations we are in. A handling strategy is dependent of context, and no handling strategy is better than another¹¹. We possess many different handling strategies. Nevertheless, we often use the same handling strategies in situations where we feel under pressure. A handling strategy is used both in and outside of the organizational context. In a psychological perspective, our family is the first organization that we are a part of, and hence many handling strategies can be traced to our childhood. I have mapped different handling strategies and divided them into levels. In this article though, I will only describe the handling strategies on a general level.

A central part of the treatment is the learning of new handling strategies, since this is where the employee understands how present handling strategies can be adjusted and how new handling strategies can change and lessen the amount of stress symptoms. Likewise, it is crucial in prevention of relapse. Novel brain research has shown¹² how cortisol is creating a domino effect in which the path between hippocampus¹³ and amygdala¹⁴ is fixed in a way that creates a vicious circle where the brain is predisposed for a constant state of fight or flight response. In other

⁸ Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne. "How stress tears us apart: Enzyme attacks synaptic molecule, leading to cognitive impairment." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 2014.

Nicole Branam. "Stress Kills Brain Cells Off." Scientific American Mind. 2007.

Yale University. "How stress and depression can shrink the brain." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 12 August 2012.

⁹ cognition, realisation, thinking, use of knowledge.

¹⁰ Lazarus and Folkman. Stress, Appraisal, and Coping (1984). Page 141.

¹¹ Lazarus and Folkman. Stress, Appraisal, and Coping (1984). Page 140.

¹² Christopher Bergland. Chronic Stress Can Damage Brain Structure and Connectivity (2014).

¹³ Hippocampus is pivotal in relation to learning and memory, especially in relation to linguistic memory in the dominant side (typically left side), and photographic memory in the non-dominant side of the brain (typically right side), as well as in relation to the ability of spatial orientation.

¹⁴ Amygdala is a small area which, among other things, deal with fear and defense mechanisms. It is a part of the limbic system and is connected to the pituitary gland, adrenal glands, olfactory sense, as well as the consumption of food and fluids. Amygdala can release various visceral and autonomous reactions (respiration, circulation, gastrointestinal tract).

words, a focus on learning new or adjusting present handling strategies will contribute to preventing relapse and creating increased resilience.

Hence, adjustment and learning of new handling strategies is essential in preventing relapse. As brain research shows¹⁵, we are able to create new neural paths. Hence, new handling strategies entail a change of the negative feedback mechanisms that can be created during long-term stress¹⁶. Besides being shown in brain research, this my personal experience from thousands of treatments during the years.

Periods of further stress symptoms are common during a treatment course. Graham focuses on learning the employee to respond rather than react. She describes the process as being able to pause, observe the situation from a neutral stance, and hence try to solve the problem¹⁷. This focus is used in stress treatment in situations where the employee is experiencing his/her handling strategies to be counterproductive.

An example is a leading doctor with a fundamental perception that he has to hold the role as the rescuer. This means that he will often attend to many patients, take on the leader role among the doctors in the clinic, the secretaries will contact him if they are having challenges on the clinic, he is actively participating in his children's sport activities, he is positioned in various executive committees, etc. He is always working and always answers yes when asked to participate. He takes on the role as the rescuer, and is having a hard time saying no, because he feels like he has to rescue everybody around him. In stress treatment of this doctor, a focus will be on the cognitive and behavioral level. Primarily, he will learn to listen to his own needs, and hence, behaviorally, he will learn to put this in balance, so that he can be helpful without experiencing stress symptoms. Some of what he actively learned was not only to take on the leader role and not only listen to other people's needs, but also his own needs. He still uses the stress relieving activities and listen and conform to his own needs. Some might have advised the doctor just to say no when asked, but if there is no cognitive focus on changing his perception of being in the leader role he will easily restate the old handling strategy in the long term. He changed his perception of the role as the rescuer from being something exclusively positive to a more nuanced perception of the role. He experienced that being stressed, he did not feel well, and hence, he was not able to rescue anyone. His handling strategy was adjusted so that it could be used at building up sustained resilience.

¹⁵ Kaufer et al. Stress and glucocorticoids promote oligodendrogenesis in the adult hippocampus (2014).

¹⁶ Gene E. Robinson Brain on stress: How the social environment gets under the skin (2012).

¹⁷ Linda Graham. The Neuroscience of Resilience (2010).

The way of being submitted to work

In phase 3 the organizational context is included. Often, the employee returns to his/her usual work context with similar tasks in the same office or department with the same colleagues as before. The more recognizable factors, the easier the return process is. In this phase I always recommend that the employee is secured having easy and clear tasks, one at a time. A subdivision of tasks like this can increase productivity with as much as 40 percent¹⁸.

During rehabilitation, the employee needs to continue doing the stress relieving activities. Studies has shown that the volume of the hippocampus increases, and the memory is improved when being physically active¹⁹. This will improve the physical resilience of the employee in the long term. Further, studies show that people being physically active have increased resilience to both physical and psychological stress²⁰.

Further, breaks are planned every hour to maintain rest on the nervous system. Studies have shown that a balance in working activities can create higher energy, mental clarity, creativity and focus, which will make the employee's resilience increase during the work day²¹. During the start-up phase the employees working hours should not exceed what has been planned.

Usually, I recommend a start-up of 9-12 hours work per week. The exact number of hours depend on the comprehensiveness of the stress symptoms, as well as the usual tasks of the employee and the organizational context.

In this phase, the conversion of the previous learning is of highest priority. This means that the focus is not on how much work is being done, but on the way in which the tasks are approached. Especially in the beginning, the conversion of the handling strategies in the organizational context is the focal point. According to Graham, we are training the core of resilience when being able to cognitively take a step back from the situation and categorizing our thoughts and feelings with the purpose of creating opportunities and making sound decisions²². Lazarus and Folkman define this as adjustment of the strategy on the basis of the context²³.

¹⁸ Fernandez 5 Ways to Boost Your Resilience at Work. Harvard Business Review 2016.

¹⁹ Pajonk et al. Hippocampal plasticity in response to exercise in schizophrenia (2010).

²⁰ Georgiades A, Sherwood A, Gullette EC, Babyak MA, Hinderliter A, Waugh R, et al. Effects of exercise and weight loss on mental stress-induced cardiovascular responses in individuals with high blood pressure. *Hypertension* 2000 Aug;36(2):171-6. Peronnet F, Cleroux J, Perrault H, Cousineau D, de CJ, Nadeau R. Plasma norepinephrine response to exercise before and after training in humans. *J Appl Physiol* 1981 Oct;51(4):812-5. Klaperski S, von DB, Heinrichs M, Fuchs R. Effects of a 12-week endurance training program on the physiological response to psychosocial stress in men: a randomized controlled trial. *J Behav Med* 2014 Dec;37(6):1118-33. Rimmel U, Zellweger BC, Marti B, Seiler R, Mohiyeddini C, Ehlert U, et al. Trained men show lower cortisol, heart rate and psychological responses to psychosocial stress compared with untrained men. *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 2007 Jul;32(6):627-35.

²¹ Fernandez 5 Ways to Boost Your Resilience at Work. Harvard Business Review 2016.

²² Linda Graham. *The Neuroscience of Resilience* (2010).

²³ Lazarus and Folkman. *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping* (1984). Page 140.

It is in this phase the organizational context can support the treatment by creating the best organizational framework for the return of the employee. What exactly the organization can do for the employee is individually, depending on the organizational context and the tasks and handling strategies of the employee.

In case the leader has not got the opportunity to keep an eye on the employee during the work day, I recommend appointing a gatekeeper that can support the employee in the organizational context. A gatekeeper can hold the function of following up on how the employee is holding up, help coordinate and keep a sense of perspective of which tasks can be solved by the employee and when.

Resilience can become a joint responsibility in the organization. If we look at the IGLO-model, in which there is a functional interaction between the individual, group, leaders, and the organizational level, resilience can be developed in the long term.

At the individual level, the employee can be focusing on: taking one task at a time, keeping to the working hours, taking a break every hour, navigating and adjusting in handling strategies according to the given context.

As the employee increases his/her working hours and the complexity of the tasks, the learning has been automated. According to Graham, at this time, the employee has developed response flexibility that is described by the ability to: pause, mentally go back, reflect, change perspective, create opportunities and make sound decisions²⁴. Now, the employee has built up preventive tools to calm down the nervous system and changed his/her handling strategies for strengthening future resilience on the physiological as well as the psychological level.

At the department or team level, the colleagues can contribute by: providing time and room for the employee to solve his/her tasks, support the employee in taking breaks, and be solution-oriented in challenges.

At the organizational or team level, the organization can further contribute with a good and appreciative working environment with positive working relationships. Brain research has shown that the relieve of oxytocin lessens the stress response. Oxytocin is a natural neurotransmitter and hormone that is relieved when we feel secure, have faith, are experiencing a connection or attachment to others, and have the feeling of being appreciated²⁵. This means that when the employee is in a good and appreciative working environment with faith, cooperation, and appreciative communication, he/she will relieve oxytocin, which lessens stress and increases resilience. Further, a McKinseys report shows that social networks in companies can increase

²⁴ Linda Graham. The Neuroscience of Resilience (2010).

²⁵ Linda Graham. The Neuroscience of Resilience (2010).

productivity by 20-25 percent²⁶. When relations like these are made, it fastens and eases the solving of tasks for the employee.

At the leader level, the leader can contribute by: noticing the tasks the employee is solving, appreciate the progress the employee is making, both in solving tasks and increasing the working hours, support the solving of tasks and create an overview during the process, as well as adjusting the tasks and working hours on the basis of feedback from the employee.

At the organizational level IHH Nordic is a good example of the resilience accumulation mentioned above. They have reduced the weekly working hours, increased the breaks, and improved the relations in the organization. According to Berlingske Business, IHH Nordic has increased their productivity by 20 percent, and the sickness absenteeism in the company is more than reduced by half. In this article, it has been shown how IHH Nordic can reduce sickness absenteeism, increase productivity and bottom-line results by thinking in other solutions. In this way, with a continuous focus on restitution, all organizations can positively influence the employee's health and accumulation of resilience, as well as create the breeding ground for performance and effectivity for an improved bottom-line.

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²⁶ The McKinsey-report/Paul Butler: "Visualizing friendships"

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