



Taking a mental health day (and not feeling guilty about it)

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Have you ever called in and told your workplace that you're taking a mental health day?

It can be hard to take one and be open about it. But mental health days — and actually taking them — are important for us and for our workplaces.

As principal organisational psychologist Rachel Clements explains, mental health days help keep us healthy and do a better job. "Taking a mental health day when you need it is, firstly, about demonstrating self-awareness, which is a cornerstone of resilience," Ms Clements says.

"That awareness of 'when is my stress now shifting from helpful to harmful?' is a very good thing for people to be able to monitor themselves.

"What people are trying to do is prevent little problems from becoming bigger."

It's not just employees who benefit from mental health days and a 'mentally friendly' workplace, says Dr Grant Blashki, a GP and beyondblue's lead clinical adviser with several decades' experience in the mental health sector. "There was a big report done that found for every \$1 a workplace spends on making their workplace more mentally healthy, in the long-term they recouped \$2.30 on average," Dr Blashki says.

The reasons? Less absenteeism and less presenteeism (when you're unwell at work and not as productive) – not to mention people feel more passionate about their work when support is available.

"So aside from the moral compassion argument, there's also an economic argument to make the workplace more mentally healthy," Dr Blashki says.

It's important to note: some people use mental health days as a way to "chuck a sickie" and take a day off. But for those who need them, mental health days are important for maintaining their wellbeing.

"We have to be a bit careful with language," Dr Blashki says. "In Australian culture we use terms like depression or mental health day in a colloquial way, rather than in a clinical way."

Why many of us don't take mental health days

Despite mental health becoming more openly discussed, many people feel they can't discuss mental health days with managers or colleagues. This usually comes down to workplace culture and shame in the community.

"In a perfect world we would have less stigma in both society and the workplace. But the reality is we still have a long way to go," Dr Blashki says.

When we asked around about how people take a mental health day, most people explained they fabricate a physical ailment (such as gastro or a cold) when calling in sick. Although a few people responded saying they're comfortable openly taking mental health days, most felt their workplace was too "old school" to accept their need for time off. Regardless of how you go about taking that day off for your mental health, remember that your need for a day to mentally recharge doesn't make you a bad or lazy employee.

As Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, director-general of the World Health Organisation, says: "Mental illness is not a personal failure. In fact, if there is failure, it is to be found in the way we have responded to people with mental and brain disorders."

Even if we know all of this, it can be difficult to navigate the conversations around mental health days. So here are things to keep in mind about how and when to take a mental health day.

Know when you need one

When taking, and talking about, mental health days, it's important to make the distinction between looking after your mental health and wanting a day off.

However, that doesn't mean you have to have a diagnosed mental health condition to take one, Ms Clements explains.

"That's the whole aim of it: to get it before it becomes a mental health issue," she says. "Taking a mental health day is a proactive thing."

If you're not sure whether you need a mental health day, Ms Clements outlines some warning signs to look out for:

- Physical: having constant colds and flus, headaches and migraines, gastrointestinal conditions, major body tension issues (e.g. back or neck pain), significant weight loss or weight gain, mouth ulcers, adult acne, psoriasis or other skin conditions.
- Mood: feeling angry, irritable, low frustration tolerance, reactive, tearful or anxious.
- Behaviour: pulling away, disconnecting from others, not feeling like you've got much energy to devote to work, performance changes, making simple errors, mind being off the job, having more accidents, being more irritable or grumpy with colleagues.
- Thoughts: feeling disillusioned, disgruntled, discontent, catastrophising, personalising things you wouldn't normally, feeling pessimistic or negative.

Tell your boss (or don't)

How to tell the boss is one of the main worries surrounding taking a mental health day. The nature of the conversation you have, and how much you reveal, depends on a few factors.

"The context, workplace and relationship with the manager really need to be taken into account when deciding whether or not to discuss your mental health with your boss," Dr Blashki says.

Good reasons to tell your boss/workplace: if your mental health condition affects your ability to safely perform your role (e.g. if your job involves heavy machinery or you're in the health sector), and if your employer is supportive and open to making changes to your work and workload.

Valid reasons not to tell your boss/workplace: you can do your job just fine and you don't want to discuss it, you don't need any adjustments to your workload, or you're worried about discrimination or reduced opportunity for your career progression.

"You might be worried about the stigma in the workplace. Even though there are some legislative requirements for employers, they might not provide an appropriate level of support even if you tell them," Dr Blashki says.

If you're in a toxic work environment and you're being bullied or discriminated against, it's important to have documentation and tell your employer. Fair Work Australia can also help with workplace issues and their services are free.

Whether you've called in sick with a "cold" or openly told your work you're taking a mental health day, if you need a medical certificate for your sick day(s), head to your GP. "I don't tell patients that they have to tell their boss [about their mental health]," Dr Blashki says.

"On the medical certificate I'll often write 'medical condition' as the reason, unless the patient particularly wants me to write the issue."

Spend the day doing what's right for you

There's no one way to spend a mental health day. Maybe what you need is to catch up on sleep, see a supportive friend or attend a yoga class.

"If you have a day off, people can take that time to nurture themselves, be kind to themselves and maybe get some exercise, which is really good when people are feeling stressed," he says. *"Sometimes personal grooming – getting a haircut or some new clothes if it's within your means – can make a difference."*

If self-care activities don't cut it, mental health days are a great opportunity to touch base with a healthcare professional. "If people are having mental health issues, the GP can do a special consultation called a GP Mental Health Treatment Plan," Dr Blashki says.

"This is a structured assessment and entitles the patient to go to a psychologist for 6-10 sessions [in a calendar year]."

If you do end up asking your GP to develop a Mental Health Treatment Plan, it's worth noting this can interfere with your ability to secure personal insurance.

Keep communication lines open (if you can and feel comfortable)

If you've decided to tell your boss about your mental health and they've responded well, Dr Blashki says to consider talking with them regularly about how you're tracking. If you feel comfortable, you could also talk with workmates you're close with.

"You'd be surprised, when you share your experiences there are other people who have been through it – including the boss – and they can share their experiences and know what you might be going through. This can really help," he says.

If one or two mental health days isn't making a difference, it's important to come up with a long-term plan with work and/or a healthcare professional. "Having a good recovery plan is important," Ms Clements says.

"Reach out for support and assistance. A lot of organisations have employee assistance programs where people can go at no cost to receive confidential coaching and wellbeing assistance."

Work and life factors that can affect mental health

Everyone's mental ill health experiences are different and can be exacerbated by various life and work factors, Dr Blashki says.

Life factors include: relationship issues, employment difficulty, drug and alcohol issues, physical illness and pain, and life transitions such as becoming a parent or home owner.

Workplace factors include: working long hours for long periods of time, uncertainty about job security, insufficient support (particularly for new employees), unclear role definitions and measures of success, and toxic workplaces where bullying or discriminating behaviour is occurring.

[If you or anyone you know needs help:](#)

Lifeline on 13 11 14

beyondblue on 1300 224 636

MensLine Australia on 1300 789 978

Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467

Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800

Headspace on 1800 650 890

QLife on 1800 184 527

