

- Burn out (Psychology) / Mental health

Burning out at work? Take a 'sad day'

Here is how to preserve your mental health in a world that values productivity over well-being

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Have you ever felt nervous or afraid to take time off from work to look after your mental health?



Ms Marisa Kabas, a writer and political strategist who lives in New York City, recently posed a similar question on Twitter, inspired by American gymnast Simone Biles, who bowed out of some Olympic events last month to protect her mental health.

“It was so shocking to so many people,” Ms Kabas said in an interview. “Because the whole mentality is, ‘be strong and push through the pain’.”

The tweet drew thousands of responses, many from employees who said they do not disclose the real reason they need time away from work, or feel pressured to lie about it because they are embarrassed. Others said they had never taken a mental health day.

As a freelancer who has written prolifically about her health problems, including anxiety and depression, Ms Kabas said she sometimes wakes up, decides “I can’t do it today” and takes the day off – a luxury she did not feel she had as an employee.

About three-quarters of people in the United States who work for private industries and state or local government have paid sick leave. However, surveys suggest that a number of these employees are unlikely to use this leave for mental health reasons or are scared of being punished for doing so.

If you are among the hesitant, experts say it is time to start thinking about how to protect and prioritise your mental well-being, especially as millions of employees who worked remotely during the pandemic start returning to the office.

“You wouldn’t feel bad about taking time off when sick. You shouldn’t feel bad about taking some time off when you’re sad,” said Dr Natalie Dattilo, a clinical health psychologist

at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and an instructor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

"Your body needs a rest; your brain needs a break."

WHEN TO TAKE A 'SAD DAY'

There is no official definition for a "sad day", also known as a mental health day.

Typically, it is paid time off drawn from sick leave days – or personal days – to help employees who are not feeling like their usual selves. It offers them an opportunity to refresh their minds, do something meaningful or simply take a break from daily stressors.

The "sad day" is only a temporary fix and not meant to address deeper problems – but sometimes, a little time away can make a big difference.

A company may not specify that sick leave can be used for this purpose, but "mental health is health", said Ms Schroeder Stribling, president and chief executive of the advocacy group Mental Health America. "The two are inseparable."

The signs that you need to take time away from work may not necessarily be obvious, she said.

Indicators include changes in mood, productivity or ability to concentrate. You may also notice you are less patient and more irritable than usual, or are having trouble sleeping. You might also have physical symptoms.

"If I start getting headaches, that's a sign of stress for me and I need to address that with a mental health day," Ms Stribling said.

Given the extraordinary stressors of the pandemic, regardless of one's symptoms, "if you feel like you might benefit from a mental health day, you have earned one", said Dr Adam Grant, an organisational psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton business school. In a recent episode of his podcast, he explored the benefits of the "sad day" and the importance of building a culture of compassion at work.

Some companies may require employees to provide documentation, such as a doctor's note, when they take sick leave, so it is important to understand what the law says in different regions.

In New York City, for example, an employee is not required to provide documentation unless more than three consecutive days of sick leave have been used.

Your workplace culture and your relationship with your manager will dictate how open you choose to be about why you are taking time off. You should not feel compelled to divulge more than necessary.

"I think sometimes we overshare when we're anxious or perhaps feel a little bad about having to take time," Dr Dattilo said.

In most situations, an employee should say only that he or she needs to take a day of sick leave, the experts advised.

"I think the safe advice is not to be upfront," said Dr Andrew Kuller, a clinical psychologist at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts.

Not everybody values mental health, he added, and "unless you're close with your supervisor, it is a risk".

When employees are mentally and physically exhausted, it affects the quality of their work, their productivity and the people around them, Dr Grant said.

"I think it's easier to have a conversation about burnout than it is about feeling sad or depressed or anxious, so I would probably play it safe there and highlight why this is good for the organisation, not just good for you," he said.

WHAT TO DO ON A 'SAD DAY'

In deciding how to use a mental health day, it may help to think about what brought you to this point in the first place. Do your personal relationships need attention? Are you exhausted from your workload and desperate to disconnect from everything? Or did you just have a particularly stressful week and want to spend some time decompressing?

Maybe it is a combination of several things.

Thinking it through ahead of time will help you use your day off in the most helpful way possible.

While one person might benefit from a massage or a day of pampering, another person might want to paint or garden.

Others will find the most value in reconnecting with friends or family.

The day might also provide an opportunity to rethink one's day-to-day activities.

"Are they giving you pleasure or meaning?" Dr Kuller asked.

Next, think about ways to take care of yourself on a regular basis, he added, like meditation, yoga or cooking a healthy meal.

Make a plan to do more of those things going forward. Whatever you choose, do not spend the day checking your work messages or feeling guilty, the experts said.

"Self-care is not a selfish act," Dr Grant said. "People who are selfless to the point of self-sacrifice end up burning out."

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