

- Holidays / Stress

How to beat the post-holiday blues

We tell ourselves the Christmas and new year period is a chance to reset, yet many of us return to normal life with depression-like symptoms,

The Southland Times · 9 Jan 2023 · 1 · writes Lyric Waiwiri-Smith.

Already three coffees deep, drowning under your workload, and feeling the post-holiday blues on your first day back to work? You're not alone.



We tell ourselves the Christmas and new year period is a chance to kick back, relax, and hit the reset button on the year that's been – so why do so many of us feel so low when we return to normal life?

While the post-holiday blues is not a clinical disorder, psychiatrist Karen Nimmo says this is a real phenomenon that shares symptoms with depression.

So, how can we combat these feelings and kick off the new working year with a bang?

“For a lot of people, this was the year of burnout,” says Dr Angela Lim, a co-founder of Clearhead, a support system for the mental health and wellbeing of workplaces and individuals.

“Often we underestimate how long it takes to recover from burnout, so taking even a holiday break won't be quite enough to get yourself back into position.”

Lim says there are three main issues that will quickly come into play as we move from holiday mode back to settling into our regular schedules – the first being workload.

“Coming into 2023, it's important to set much clearer boundaries around what's a reasonable workload, what are reasonable expectations, and be able to push back and say: ‘I need more support to do this’ and

‘This deadline is not reasonable,’,” Lim says.

“That’s what we want people to come into 2023 with – a lot more boundary setting.

‘To be able to say: ‘This is what I need’; ‘That’s not a realistic timeline’; ‘I need more support to deliver this’ – that will prevent them from getting to that burnout stage.’”

The second issue is a feeling of detachment from work, and this can affect your focus and motivation.

“If we see a reason or [understand] why we do something, even if it’s really hard work, we feel really energised by it,” Lim says.

“We get into a state of flow and see how our work will matter in terms of the big picture . . . What some leaders can be bad at is communicating where the work is going, why it’s being done, and how what you do helps us achieve that.”

Vocalising your concerns with your manager and creating an honest conversation can help to ease stress and help to manage seemingly daunting workloads more easily.

“If people throw you 10 things and reasonably you can only do five things, asking ‘How does this help move the needle? How does help me find fulfilment?’ allows you to prioritise the things you can do and manage realistic expectations.”

She says workers feel particularly disenchanted when they pour significant effort into projects they are later told weren’t as high a priority as they thought.

Lim’s final tip for successfully beating burnout is to recognise and combat any loneliness you may be feeling in your workspace.

Coming off the back of the highly social Christmas period, our feelings of isolation can be heightened when we return to work without a strong support system. “A lot of times the holidays are a very confronting period for people, because on the outside it looks like everyone has these amazing relationships that we don’t have,” Lim says.

She says one way to conquer loneliness is to set up healthy networks outside work. “You spend all this time with friends and family over the holidays, but make sure you take time to schedule a catchup at least once a month with someone that you care about.”

Keeping strong relationships with regular social outings outside work can help to “refill your cup” and stop you from feeling like you’re hanging on for the next holiday.

However, maintaining positive relationships within your workplace is equally important, and Lim says finding opportunities to reconnect with colleagues will benefit you in the long run. “Finding ways in which work isn’t just all about work, but also about connecting with human beings, will make your work much more enjoyable,” she says.

“When you’re struggling with your work, you’re already feeling like you can’t ask people for help. Building that relationship and trust already in a non-work context helps build a collaborative culture.”

Lim says these tips can help individuals get back on their feet at work, but organisations also need to be able to support their employees.

“For people who are struggling, they need a supportive person at work, so they’re not totally relying on themselves if they don’t have the knowledge or skill.”

“A lot of times the holidays are a very confronting period.”