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# When to take a mental health day at work - and how to talk to your boss

When life gets too much, taking a break from work can give you time to rest, recouperate and put things into perspective. But it can feel difficult to take a day off for your mental health, especially if you don't know if your boss is going to be supportive.

Ahead of World Mental Health Day, we look at the importance of taking a mental health day at work - and how to ask for time off for your wellbeing.

## What is a mental health day at work?

A mental health day is a day you take off from work to focus on your psychological health. This might mean resting or relaxing - but most importantly, it means ignoring your emails.

Taking a couple of days off will not solve the underlying problems that can lead to stress or mental health problems, but a break can give us the chance to rest and recover. Pausing can give us a chance to shake-off stress - something many of us struggle with.

Around half of workers in the UK say they are very stressed and a third say their work negatively impacts their lives outside of the workplace, according to a survey carried out by YouGov[1]. And chronic stress can contribute to anxiety, depression and burnout - a state of physical and emotional exhaustion - or make existing mental health problems worse.

# When to take a mental health day

In our fast-paced society, it can be difficult to find the time to consider how we are feeling. We're busier than ever and our attention is being pulled in many different directions - when we're not in meetings, we're emailing, or messaging on Teams.

The fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic - the economic upheaval and heightened health anxiety - and the current cost of living crisis are all contributing to higher levels of stress. But with so much going on, it can be easy to miss the key signs that we need a break.

Counselling Directory member Rosalind Miles, a psychotherapist, says she's often asked about the signs of stress or needing to take time off.

"If you're constantly feeling overwhelmed, stressed, or anxious, whether over a large project or even a simple task, it may be a sign that you need a break," she says. "If you find it difficult to concentrate, lack motivation in general for day-to-day tasks, or have a hard time engaging in your work tasks, it might be time to step away."

You might also experience physical symptoms, such as headaches, stomach upsets or general aches and pains caused by muscle tension. Another big indicator of stress is insomnia. "Tossing and turning at night, or even staring at the ceiling wide awake at 2am, can often lead to fatigue, which can be both a symptom and a cause of mental health issues," says Miles.

Stress can lead us to feel irritable, angry and fraught. "If you notice that your relationships, both at work and in your personal life, are becoming strained and perhaps you are feeling more irritated by people within your life, it's a sign that you might need some time to focus on your wellbeing," Miles adds.

"Take some time to remind yourself that it's essential to listen to your body and mind," she adds. "If you notice any of these signs, consider taking a day off or seeking support from a mental health professional. Taking steps to care for your mental health is a sign of strength, not weakness."

# How to speak to your boss about taking a mental health day

The easiest way to take a mental health day is to plan it in advance and organise it with your manager. But, as is often the case, we don't realise we need a day off until we've reached our limit and need to call in sick at the last minute.

"Approaching your boss or manager about taking a day off for mental health can be a sensitive conversation," says Miles. "However, it can also show courage to acknowledge that something doesn't feel quite right and that you need to reach out."

### Be honest

Plan what you want to say and be clear about why you need some time. "You don't necessarily have to disclose specific details about your life and mental health, but you can mention that you're dealing with some personal matters or feeling overwhelmed at the moment," says Miles.

At the end of the day, your boss is human too. Be straightforward but respectful. "For example, you might say: 'I wanted to talk to you about taking a day off. I've been dealing with some personal matters, and I think taking a day to focus on my wellbeing will help me come back refreshed and more productive'."

### Offer a plan for coverage

It may help to suggest a plan for how your tasks and responsibilities will be handled in your absence to help reassure your boss that the work will still get done.

"It's important to remember that it's normal to feel a bit anxious, or nervous about discussing mental health with your boss, but taking care of your own mental health and wellbeing is important, too," explains Miles. "Approach the conversation with confidence, honesty, and a focus on how it will ultimately benefit both you and the company."

### Your rights

Employees are entitled to sick leave for personal illness - which may cover physical and mental conditions - but the law doesn't specifically state that employees are entitled to time off for their mental health. Depending on the amount of sick leave taken from work, you may need to provide a 'fit note' from your doctor or another healthcare professional.

**Speak to your doctor**

Taking a day or two off will not address the problems causing your stress. If you're struggling with stress or your mental health and it's having a serious effect on your life, it's important to speak to your doctor[2]. You can also self-refer for counselling on the NHS without having to make a GP appointment. You can also find a therapist privately, but you will have to pay for the therapy sessions.

# Further reading

1. HSE: Work-related stress, anxiety or depression statistics in Great Britain, 2022.

2. Gov UK: Taking sick leave.

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