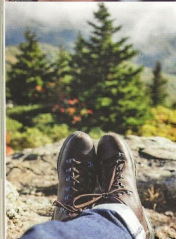
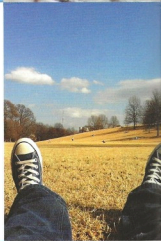


## MAKING WELLNESS DAYS WORK



The introduction of days off to prioritise your mental wellbeing promises a happier, more productive workplace. Here's how to use yours, guilt free...

Words Sophie Goddard



**W**hen was the last time you called in sick or booked a day off and felt an uneasy pang of guilt about it? Well, here's the good news: research suggests this could soon be a thing of the past, with a rise in workplaces pushing back against 'hustle culture' in search of a happier, healthier work-life balance for all.

According to a 2021 report from wellness company Wellable, 88% of US companies are increasingly investing in mental health at work. Likewise, more UK workplaces are moving from a traditionally reactive way of looking at physical and mental health to a much more proactive approach instead. Figures from Bupa Global, for example, indicate that UK businesses increased their employee-wellbeing budgets for 2022 by up to 18%. Has the pandemic put our priorities into perspective?

#### Putting health first

You might already have heard of the concept of 'wellbeing leave' – as adopted by companies such as Aviva, Lendlease, LinkedIn and Bumble. This is anything from one day to a whole week for employees to focus on their wellbeing and mental health, and it's a move we're likely to see more of over the coming months. "Unlike sick days, where you are generally too unwell to work, wellness days are designed to help you recharge and hopefully prevent you from needing a sick day in the first place," says executive coach and psychologist Kelly Swingle, who specialises in preventing burnout.

"While wellness days can help improve staff wellbeing, productivity and retention, companies investing in wellness initiatives are more likely to report happier, more loyal and productive staff, who are less likely to take time off sick or leave work altogether," says Emma Mamo, head of workplace wellbeing at mental-health charity Mind. And if you do feel that all-too-familiar guilt creeping in? "Ask yourself whether you'd judge somebody for taking a day off to focus on their health, and treat yourself with that same compassion," says Kelly.

#### Optimise your wellness day

"Recognising the type of rest you need on a wellness day is key," continues Kelly. "The seven types of rest are mental, physical, emotional, social, sensory, creative and spiritual. So if you require social rest, for example, the last thing you need is socialising. Likewise, if it's physical rest you need, a gym session or hours of gardening probably aren't going to recharge you effectively."

Hannah Beckett-Pratt, psychotherapist and founder of WellSpace Counselling, agrees. "The activity itself is arbitrary – really, it's the intention underlying it that matters. Consider a wellness day as a gifted opportunity to do whatever you need to feel refreshed, and make sure you do it with conscious intention, rather than passively letting the day pass. Don't feel you need to stay locked inside as if you're unwell, either – for some, a leisurely coffee with a friend will be far more restorative than hours of Netflix." **WH**

#### When you need

##### PHYSICAL REST

**YOU FEEL** Exhausted, irritable and constantly wired.

**TRY** Allowing yourself to enjoy passive rest in the form of sleep or napping, or restorative activities such as Yin yoga, a massage or meditation. Turn off any diary reminders or alarms and resist the urge to berate yourself for 'non-essential' activities, such as finally downloading that audiobook or enjoying a cup of tea outside. If you wear a fitness watch, today might be a good day to go without.

#### When you need

##### MENTAL REST

**YOU FEEL** Forgetful, often struggling to concentrate and switch off at the end of each day.

**TRY** Exercise. Even gentle movement, such as a walk, can prove beneficial for concentration and feelings of 'brain fog', helping us unwind and switch off from stressful situations and even stimulating the growth of new brain cells, according to a Swedish study. And when you do return to work, you'll feel less anxious due to the release of neurotransmitters such as dopamine, serotonin and norepinephrine. Likewise, switching to a simple activity you really enjoy, such as baking, listening to a funny podcast or being around animals can help calm our nervous system and prompt deep feelings of relaxation.

### 3 STEPS TO MANAGING YOUR MENTAL WELLBEING AT WORK

1

#### ASSERT YOURSELF

"Too many of us ask if it would 'be OK' if we took a day off when we are unwell," says Hannah Beckett-Pratt. It's up to you to assess whether you need time off.

Respectfully inform your boss of the situation. "I'm unfortunately unwell today so I won't be in, but I'll keep you updated and will endeavour to catch up on anything I've missed when I'm back."

2

#### VARY YOUR WORKING DAY

New and diverse experiences are linked to higher happiness levels. Those who enjoy this variety show greater activity in the brain regions associated with novelty and reward. "We spend a third of our lives at work," says Hannah. "Take walks between meetings, arrange coffee with colleagues: the more rich and varied our working life, the less chance mundanity has to set in."

3

#### MAKE WORK FRIENDS

"Having colleagues we feel supported by is a key factor in buffering workplace stress," says Hannah. "Create connections at work by checking in with others regularly and having social time such as shared breaks. Similarly, discussing colleagues' upcoming plans or holidays can help lessen feelings of guilt for taking time off, reminding us how necessary it is for everyone."