

Timeout: The Importance of Mental Health Days at Work

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The [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) (NAMI) reports that nearly 44 million adults throughout the United States are diagnosed with a mental illness each year.

“Timeout” used to mean punishment by isolation, but as adults, a little alone time doesn’t sound so bad, does it?

Work, family, household chores, daily errands; we could all use a time out. Maybe that’s the best way to start the day, and set your focus on what you’re *able* to do, rather than what you *want* to do.

Mental health days (MHDs) are not about laziness, but rather with self-care in the interest of productivity. Just as flight attendants advise donning your own air mask first before helping others, sometimes it’s necessary to take care of yourself in order to take care of business.

MHDs can help with the mental traffic jams that occur when our minds can feel cluttered and moving forward feels impossible. At work, we are required to complete tasks, communicate, and make progress in all areas of our roles. Mental traffic jams make it hard to accomplish much of anything. So...why not take a sick day?

While it is true that mental health complications do count as an illness, we’re not quite describing a sick day. Full-time employees often have an allotment of personal days to be used at their discretion. Mental health is certainly a private matter, but doesn’t fit neatly into either category.

When did use of employee benefits become a competition? When did full-time work benefits become more of a restriction than a privilege? Although personal days require advance notice and sick days can be used without notice, there are still limitations imposed on the employee’s personal time, and mental space.

This makes MHDs that much more important. Common ‘sick day illnesses’ usually include the common cold, the flu, or a stomach bug. Although uncomfortable, these are usually resolved within a couple of days. Ailments related to our thoughts and feelings, however, cannot be reconciled as easily and may require ongoing care. An employee stuck in this impractical cycle may feel forced into using sick days for MHDs, which may give an employer the incorrect impression that the employee is constantly laid up or worse—lying.

What are the Next Steps?

A change in policy is necessary; and while progress is slow, it is steady. Last year, [Madalyn Parker made waves](#) with an email to her employer that she was taking two days off from work to tend to her mental health. Parker’s supervisor not only complied with her request, but commended her for telling the truth about her needs, which often carry stigmas in and out of the workplace. Still, there are so many people who suffer from documented and undocumented mental illnesses who do not get a supportive response when they request time for MHDs. Many people have not disclosed that they require more time and nurturing than others to be mentally well and would feel more secure if there was a policy in place that backed them on this.

Debunking mental health stigmas in the workplace is the next step. While useful, most benefits packages are not entirely realistic. The burden is placed entirely on the employee to tailor their personal lives to fit the needs and schedule of the company is absurd, inhumane, and dangerous to any employer looking to retain workers.

Sicknesses of the mind and body are not practical, and rarely are they convenient. The negative stigmas placed upon mental illness, largely due to fear of the unknown, lead many people to feel that they must be dishonest about their needs. There is much that we still don't fully understand about mental health and illnesses, and employers are not always understanding about employees who require MHDs.

NAMI and the World Health Organization are valuable resources for employers to lean on for education. Both offer constructive lessons on mental health ailments that affect productivity. By partnering with small, local organizations, employers can do their part to help change public perception of mental health issues.

Employees are people first, and employers are wrong to think that mental state is unrelated to the workplace. MHDs are beneficial for everyone, employers included. Mental traffic jams can be contagious, spreading until the entire workplace is affected.

Conversely, mental health is the glue holding your organization together. With a clear mind and refreshed perspective, the employees you manage will be more focused, efficient, and satisfied. Employers as well as employees must educate themselves about mental health, the needs of those affected by mental illness, and how to make progress in shifting the stigma.

The addition of MHDs to employee benefits packages can transform the way we think, feel, work, and *live*. Your employees will greatly appreciate the consideration granted to their wellbeing, and we think that's a worthy investment.