

How to take a 'me' day and not feel guilty

How often have you needed a day off work to recharge your mind, but you've called in sick?

Or even bent the truth and claimed you've got a stomach bug or doctor's appointment?

We all need a break from work sometimes and having time off for your wellbeing is just as important as time off for a physical illness. Taking a 'me' day off to mentally recharge can help you return to work with new energy and motivation.

With an ongoing global pandemic, it's normal for all of us to feel exhausted and overwhelmed, says SEEK's Resident Psychologist Sabina Read.

Read works with professionals at all levels and says everyone has been affected by the pandemic in some way. "We're all feeling some level of burnout and a decrease in motivation."

If you feel like you're dragging yourself to the finish line, here are some tips on recharging and looking after your wellbeing.

What is a wellbeing day?

A wellbeing day is a day off to reduce stress and [prevent burnout, which is a more serious type of chronic stress](#). "We all feel mentally fragile and vulnerable sometimes," Read says. "And wellbeing days are as normal and valid as sick leave days for physical illness."

"They are a way to give back to yourself, put your own needs on the map, and prioritise the mind and body that enable you to live and work in ways that are important and meaningful to you," says Read.

Mental health days matter, too: 69% of people believe mental health days would positively impact their mental health in the workplace, research for SEEK shows.

A third of people (36%) have taken time off for mental health reasons, but more than half (54%) have given a reason other than mental health for taking the time off.

And 34% of people have called in sick without a reason.

How to take a wellbeing day without the guilt

If you had to take a day off work because of a physical illness, would you worry about calling in sick? Chances are you wouldn't. But many of us are reluctant to tell our boss we need time off for our wellbeing.

The research shows that 41% of people felt uncomfortable or extremely uncomfortable talking to their manager about mental health.

But wellbeing is just as important as our physical health, Read says. “There's no difference between prioritising treatment for a broken elbow or diabetes, and for emotional strain or psychological hardship. We do ourselves a disservice by pretending that it's not okay to talk about mental health or wellbeing.

“Taking a wellbeing day and being riddled with guilt negates the purpose of taking time away from work,” Read says.

If you feel guilty about taking a wellbeing day, try these tips.

1. **Talk about it:** If you're feeling it, it's likely others are too, says Read. Sometimes the reassurance of others can help normalise taking the time you need.
2. **Tune in:** Acknowledge what you need. Whether it's more sleep, more exercise or less alcohol, we usually know the actions we need to take for our wellbeing. “We often overlook them, don't make the time or struggle to act on them.” Admitting this need can motivate you to take action to address it.
3. **Look after yourself:** “Self-care is so important. It's not something we can skimp on and then expect to keep being able to go on indefinitely.” On your day off work, catch up on sleep, practice deep breathing exercises, go for a walk or see a friend.

It can be hard to ‘do nothing’, but give yourself permission to do so. “Doing nothing is actually really productive for our wellbeing and vitality,” Read says.

The signs of burnout to look out for

There are key signs that mean your stress levels are high and you may be getting overwhelmed. Knowing the signs of burnout will help you take a break before you get to that point.

There are clues in our thoughts and behaviours, Read says. Has your day-to-day life been affected, or are there things you aren't doing any more that you normally do?

You might notice changes in your thought patterns such as:

- Feeling more moody or irritable
- Feeling lonely or having lower self-esteem
- Having trouble switching off when you need to
- Having trouble concentrating.

Or changes in your behaviour such as:

- Producing less at work than normal
- Seeing a reduction in the quality of your work
- Becoming withdrawn and connecting less to loved ones
- Changes in your sleep patterns
- Behaving recklessly.

“These are all clues that things are on the downward slide,” Read says. If you were always active or punctual and now you’re not, what’s changed? “Compare your behaviour with your own baseline, not someone else’s.”

How to ask for a wellbeing day

It can often be difficult asking for time off for your wellbeing. It’s not always clear how to ask, or whether you’re even able to. Maybe your boss is always busy, it’s hard to find the right moment, and you might feel unsure about bringing it up.

Many of us feel the same way, with the research showing 40% of people are too uncomfortable talking to their manager about wellbeing.

One in five of us will have a mental illness in our lifetime, Read says. “But whether you have a diagnosed wellbeing problem or not, what matters is how you feel and function. It’s totally normal to feel irritable, tired and uncertain sometimes, now more than ever.”

You also don’t need to disclose why you’d like time off, and there’s definitely no need to overshare the details, Read says.

“It’s okay just to say that you’re currently feeling exhausted, overwhelmed or depleted. I don’t think there would be a boss in the country that would be surprised hearing that someone in their team is feeling like that. And many bosses will likely be feeling the same, too.”

You could say you’re currently struggling with a few things, and you’d like to take a day or two off to recalibrate.

“It can be useful to say that you think time off will help not only you but your productivity and output, and therefore help your manager and the team as well,” she says.

Getting the most out of your wellbeing day

What you do on a wellbeing day depends on what replenishes you the most, Read says. Do something that makes you feel rested and recharged such as:

- Catching up on sleep
- Resting to gain mental clarity
- Reading
- Walking
- Connecting with a friend or family member to gain a sense of belonging
- Having a bath
- Going for a bike ride/doing exercise to re-energise
- Practicing mindfulness or meditation
- Booking in a massage
- Seeing a movie
- Gardening.

“Your wellbeing day may also include thinking about strategies to address unmet needs at work, but definitely should not involve working remotely or stewing in guilt,” Read says.

One or two days away from work is not a quick fix for long-term or complex issues, so see your GP or a psychologist if you need to talk or get more help. But checking in with yourself and taking a wellbeing day is the first step in prioritising and valuing your own needs. A break to mentally rest and recharge can give you renewed energy and focus.

Remember, if you’re finding things tough right now, you don’t have to handle it alone – there’s support available. The [Mental Health Foundation](#) has [advice on wellbeing](#), plus a helpline (1737) if you need someone to text or speak to. [The Ministry of Health](#) has also offers a collection of resources and services, and [Lifeline](#) offers 24/7 support on 0800 543 354 (0800 LIFELINE)

Source: Independent research conducted by Nature of behalf of SEEK, interviewing 4000 Kiwis annually. Published October 2021.