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How to tell your boss you need a mental health day

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Exercise can help you sort through a rough time at work. Image: Getty

Taking a day off for a stomach bug, the flu, or a sprained ankle is accepted, but taking a day off for our mental health can be tricky.

That's despite the World Health Organisation recognising burnout as an official workplace syndrome, and new research from SkyScanner and WorkScore finding 30 per cent of Australians suffer from burnout in the workplace.

The same research found that one in three Australians feel their stress levels increase when they haven't taken time off.

This needs to change, HR expert and founder of Corporate Dojo, Karen Gately told *Yahoo Finance*.

"One of the things that really makes my clients go, 'What?' And sit up straight, is when I tell them a man burst into tears at work because he's just not coping," she said.

The reality is that unhappiness at work and outside of work can have major ramifications, she said. Being able to spot the signs you need a mental health day, and have a conversation to your boss about it, is critical.

What are the signs I need a mental health day?

"The big one is focus, concentration," she said.

"But overall I say to people, observe your emotions and you're emotional resilience, because that's a very big clue to your levels of energy and your mindset, your mental health.

"So if you're finding you're hypersensitive to things, or really losing patience with people or situations that you know are just part of your job."

It's also worth noting that one of the signs you need to have a break is self-doubt, and that can manifest in anxiety around asking your boss for help, as you may believe that asking for help is unreasonable, or that it makes you appear weak.

"That in itself can make people want to hide the truth, and not be open and up front about where they're at. So there's a compounding issue there.

Workers should also keep an eye out for continued disengagement. While it's normal to have the odd day where you turn up to work, open your email and realise you don't want to be there or struggle to engage your brain, a series of days like this is a sign something is up.

"We need to start paying attention to that. To have the odd, odd day where we're just not at our best, we can't be bothered. That's just normal.

"It's the inability to regroup from that. When it starts to get just harder and harder to kind of shift that feeling, then you're better off taking a preventative step, recognising that, 'Okay, hold on a minute here. I've got to get more sleep, I've got to be eating better, I've got to be exercising, I've got to be doing whatever it is that I do to manage stress and manage energy."

And that might mean taking a day off.

I need a mental health day. What do I say?

The first thing to remember is that you don't need to tell your boss you're taking sick leave for your mental health. You can just take a day.

But, it's a good idea to let your boss know you're struggling.

"The only time I'd say to somebody, don't go and have that conversation, is about actually working for a psychopath. They know that because they've got endless experience with the person of really being unkind, thoughtless, and lacking empathy," Gately said.

"In which case, that person needs to go to the doctor, get signed out on leave, and take the time that way. And then ultimately find a new job."

Outside of those few instances, most bosses are understanding and compassionate, and that's what workers need to remember.

"One of the most important things about conversation is not having shame. There's a huge stigma around mental illness, so a lot of people are really scared to say, 'I'm not coping'.

"But in my experience, unless your boss is really not a good person or a decent person, most leaders are actually quite empathetic to that because they are actually people themselves and they understand that sometimes life just gets really tough."

She suggested workers start the conversation by saying, "Look, I'd have to have a conversation with you about where I'm at. I'm really keen to tap into your support right now, I'm finding things tough."

The next step is to sit down with your boss and saying, "The reality for me is there is a lot going on in my life that's extremely stressful, and I need to take the time out to regroup," she suggested.

"Today I'm especially not in a great head space. I'm finding it difficult to focus. I'm feeling quite emotional and upset. And I'm asking for your support, to allow me to create some space here and take a day off, and get my head to where I want it to be, where I need it to be."

What should I do on a mental health day?

The trick is to do things that both make you feel good, and that are healthy.

So that means going to bed early the night before your mental health day, and going to bed that night as well. Cooking a healthy meal can be cathartic, as well as healthy and delicious, and exercise is also a great way to get outside and start moving towards a healthier mindset.

The trouble is, if you're struggling at work, there's a good chance the only thing you'll want to do is curl up on the couch with Netflix and takeaway.

This is where the ability to make commitments to yourself comes in.

According to Gately, you need to tell yourself, "Okay, I'm going to get my sleep. I'm going to make sure I get up and have breakfast. I'll go for a walk."

"We don't have to all turn into athletes," she added, but adding some movement into the day is important.

Taking the time out of the day to look at the next two weeks and prioritise what you need to do to become happier at work is also a good step. Doing this will help you restore some power to yourself in that situation.

But, Gately noted, "When you do that, don't write a list that requires you to turn into a super person and be perfect on every level. Because again, that's when we tend to overwhelm ourselves."

If you feel like you suddenly need to develop better sleep, diet and exercising habits it can be a lot.

Instead, "Pick one or two things that are going to make me the biggest difference."

That could be committing to exercise, or committing to a diet or just committing to spending time with friends.

"Figure out what the priorities are on that day, so you can then go back to work the next day and then start to implement those plans, including how you are going to manage at work.

"Are you going to work through lunch, or are you actually going to stop for a change? Are you going to get outside or just sit at your desk and eat your food? Again, think about, "How am I going to spend my time at work so I've got the endurance, I can pace myself, I can actually get through my day."