

Make up your mind on sickie

By Ruth Ostrow

RECENTLY I was asked to write an answer, for my section in the Modern Dilemma column in Magazine, to the question: Is it okay to take the occasional mental health day off work?

Meaning, is it ever okay to take a mental health day instead of taking a sickie given that a certain amount of sick days are allowed each year, but there is no provision in most companies for a day when we are emotionally sick -- when we just can't cope.

For instance, I heard a story recently about a man who was going through a divorce. Through the ordeal he remained very effective at work, using his long hours and huge responsibilities to avoid the emotional issues he needed to face.

Then one day -- long after the separation -- he woke up feeling like crying. Every time he tried to get out the front door he began to sob. Sitting with his morning cup of coffee, alone in his bachelor pad, his kids having just been returned to their mother for the week, he was overcome with grief and just bawled and bawled. In the end he picked up the phone and called in sick.

And he was sick, heart sick. This man would have made no positive contribution to his company or his staff on that particular day.

From a purely economic point of view, it would have been disastrous to force him to take the reins. He needed to curl up in a ball and be small and vulnerable, but how on earth can you ring in and be honest about that? Nor could he really take compassionate leave, given his reaction was long after the initial crisis.

More common is something we've all experienced: working long and hard on a project, missing meals, and sleep, putting ourselves under enormous pressure, then one day just cracking. I call these days my "meltdowns."

I had an episode recently. I started to feel dizzy but pushed on regardless. I started to feel nauseous but with gruelling deadlines approaching and unpalatable consequences if I didn't complete the task, I pushed on regardless.

I felt exhausted but drank a lot of coffee, then couldn't sleep. After two weeks of running on empty I awoke one morning feeling like I'd been hit by a bus.

I kept reading the same line twice. I knew I had to go back to bed and rest, and that no good was going to come from pushing on regardless.

From years of experience I knew that I would work twice as efficiently if I took the day off and resumed the next day. Statistics prove this point.

But because exhaustion is so hard to measure, personal judgment is knocked on the head by a system intent on gleaning evidence of snot and vomit.

So we're forced to make our own executive decisions in these matters. We know that the quality of our work is going to suffer and the risk of serious error will increase unless we act like loving parents and put our tired, run-down, anxious inner-child to bed with a B-grade video and a cup of hot cocoa.

But try telling that to a boss at the other end of the phone in a society that has no tolerance for sickness of the soul.

"Ummmm, I've been feeling ill and think I might have caught something contagious," sounds much more reliable.

And this white lie is true in a way -- the contagion relates to over-work, a disease that's at epidemic proportions in today's modern world.

THE fact is most people I know are not naughty, aberrant children who are about to take a day off for no good reason.

They are reliable good workers who just become fragile. Weekends often don't hit the spot because these people go from heavy weeks to heavy weekends, trying to be amazing parents to compensate for the long hours spent at work.

Kiddies parties, kiddies movies, and "Pleeeeeeze, mummy, daddy, pleeeeeeze!" all weekend and then back to a demanding office can often render a person depleted.

So how does one find time for regular recuperation? Especially when even taking a day off in lieu of overtime is frowned on by many companies?

In my view it remains sound business practice to take rest days every so often. And it's a foolish oversight of the system that exhaustion and emotional fatigue are not respected.

And here is a fact: when we feel anxious and depressed, over-tired or stressed, the physical impact will soon follow.

Our bodies become flooded with stress hormones which are proved to lower immunity and we often become ill.

I say: have a day in bed before the snot and vomit puts you under for two weeks. Mental health days are good preventative medicine.

We live in a society that unwisely separates our minds and souls from our bodies. Let's let "sick" days include anything that incapacitates us, and let's trust our own good judgment when we need a bit of time out for the good of all.

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 14 AUG 2004