The Futility of Mental Health Days
by Bernie Wong, 2019

1   Mental health days have quickly descended upon workplace wellness conversations nationwide. Within companies, the trend has been lauded as an exciting new change by some and its utility still debated upon by others. Popular media has followed suit, with stories evangelizing its benefits, offering guidance on how to ask for them, and cautioning the possible risks in their implementation.

2   The growing popularity of mental health days is promising—the need for change around workplace mental health has been long overdue. However, the attention dedicated to whether or not employees should have a day off to take care of their mental health is limiting, slightly misdirected, and frankly uninformed.

Mental health days are by no means a novel concept

3   With the growing popularity of mental health days, some companies have begun formalizing the practice into policy, packaging mental health days as a new and effective wellness "strategy" to support employee mental health.

4   The reality is that employees across industries, demographics, and seniority levels have always been taking mental health days—they have simply remained hidden under the guise of "feeling sick," "family emergencies," and other reasons. In fact, 95% of employees who have taken time off due to stress named another reason, such as an upset stomach or headache. What's more, less than 30% of employees feel comfortable talking to their managers about their mental health, and even less (25%) to HR.

5   Mental health days have always been happening. The difference now is that some companies are deciding whether employees have expressed permission to take care of themselves. While the discourse reflects a growing openness to mental health at work, the need for mental health support extends well beyond a day off.

Mental health days are not an optimal strategy for workplace mental health

6   When faced with a stressed or burnt-out employee, a typical suggestion is to take time off, or now, a "mental health day." When implemented well, employees report lowered stress and improved productivity upon return. However, there are pitfalls to using time off as a go-to mental health strategy.

7   **The impact of mental health days doesn't last long.** Despite the benefits, two-thirds of employees report these benefits lasting only a few days, with mental health returning to their same levels pre-vacation.

8   **Mental health days are reactionary, not preventative.** Many articles outline the "signs that you need a mental health day" as exhaustion, inability to focus, feeling depressed, changes in sleep patterns, and more. These are all symptoms and precursors to burnout and full-blown mental health conditions. Employees often only take a mental health day when their symptoms begin to tangibly affect their health and work. It is unlikely that a day off will fully resolve the buildup of these symptoms.

9   **Mental health days do not address workplace factors.** While mental health days may be useful to resolve challenges happening outside of the workplace, they do not address the workplace factors that have been shown to cause the development of mental health conditions and burnout, from poor management, lack of recognition or compensation, low social support, to high job strain. Relying only on mental health days means employees will only return to the same working conditions that caused their leave.

10   **Using the prevalence of mental health conditions as an argument in favor of mental health days is irresponsible.** In popular media, we have seen many articles citing the growing prevalence of depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions as evidence of the need for and utility of mental health days. However, tying mental health days too closely with mental health conditions is misleading in purporting a suggested ability for them to treat the symptoms of mental health conditions. In fact, suggesting that a mental health day, in isolation, is an appropriate response from a manager to an employee who is facing burnout or symptoms of a mental health condition is irresponsible without a more comprehensive support system of proper benefits, resources, access to treatment, a flexible work environment, and an organizational culture that supports the mental health of all employees within companies. Mental health days are not a checkbox perk.

11   What's more, a growing body of research has found that mental health conditions are just as prevalent across seniority levels and in high-performing populations like entrepreneurs. Managing a mental health condition does not always equate to lower functioning. Facing a mental health challenge should not always mean sending a person away from work. And mental health days should not be offered as a patchwork solution to healthy work culture and a comprehensive system of support.

There are better ways to support mental health at work

12   Perhaps the largest benefit of the mental health day trend is the conversation it has sparked around mental health at work. Unfortunately, many of these conversations debate the pros and cons about a day off rather than push the conversation further to developing robust mental health strategies. Companies can and must do more for the mental health of their employees. Here are a few tips to get started:

13   **Just let them have a day off.** The answer to the question of whether an employee should or should not have a day to take care of their health should be self-evident. As Ryan Bonnici, Chief Marketing Officer at G2 writes: "No one, at any business, should feel afraid to take a mental health day. And no one should ever be punished for doing so." Forward-thinking companies are instead combining their vacation and sick days, or implementing unlimited days off. These policies make better use of time off while simultaneously planting early seeds of a culture of flexibility that can be more beneficial than time off itself. And "what if employees take advantage of it?" There's a lot to unpack here. Ultimately, rather than implementing more rules and restrictions, we encourage companies to delve deeper into their organizational culture to identify and resolve the causes to and reasons for lack of engagement.

14 **Communicate support from the top-down.** Even if employees have paid time off, it doesn't mean that they feel like they can use it. In 2014, the average U.S. employee only used half of their vacation time. Company leaders need to continually advocate for their use and manage employee hours, schedules, and workflow to ensure their use. The combination of benefits and perceived support of their use can actually increase organizational commitment and reduce intentions to leave. Most of all, support for mental health must extend beyond benefits and days off—it must be achieved through comprehensive culture change.

15 **Create a culture that supports mental health at work.** Mental health days are just the tip of the iceberg. A mentally healthy workplace is not achieved by ticking a box—it's created and sustained through culture change, which comes from a culmination of strategies like:

- Regular manager trainings
- Coaching for company leaders
- Mental health employee resource groups (ERGs)
- Mental health as a part of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts

16 These are just a start, and there are many avenues forward to achieve a mentally healthy workplace. Mental health days have their utility and benefits when implemented correctly and as a complementary solution to a comprehensive mental health strategy. However, when used as a catch-all solution for all mental health challenges by companies, they only perpetuate the cycle of burnout and absenteeism by ignoring the root causes of mental health challenges.