Feel Guilty for Taking a Sick Day? You're Not Alone, but It Shouldn't Be the Norm

By Alex Frost | October 23, 2023

It's happened to the most successful among us: You wake up, maybe in the middle of the night or maybe past your alarm, with those dreaded symptoms. Maybe you are achy or coughing, or have a fever and a serious headache. You wonder how you're ever going to pull yourself out of bed and make it through a typical workday. You might even have a debate with yourself, while skimming your calendar to-dos and meetings, obligations and responsibilities, about what it would be like to just miss it all and stay in bed.

But there's one problem, and that's the immense pressure employees feel to work through a sick day rather than relax and recover, also known as "sick day guilt." A Softworks study conducted in May and June 2023 found that, of 614 responses, a whopping 79% of participants felt obligated to work when they were sick. Softworks analyzed data from a variety of different industry sectors across the globe, from education and nonprofits to healthcare and manufacturing. The results are clear: We are headed to work sick due to that pressure, come hell or high water. And we might have the pandemic, and subsequent hybrid working conditions, to blame.

According to a 2022 study that appeared in the *Journal of Taibah University Medical Sciences* across four public schools in Nicaragua, teachers often work while ill because economically, they have to. In a 2022 Switzerland study, nearly 30% of primary care providers surveyed had skipped using sick time, despite how poorly they were feeling. All industries from veterinarians to hotel workers are suffering from this issue. Here's what experts, and those most impacted, have to say about the power of reclaiming the "proper" sick day.

What is 'sick day guilt' and 'sickness presenteeism'?

Remember "absenteeism" from those school-wide assemblies where the people who showed up every day were recognized? This is just like that, except while you are sick. The term refers to pressure to show up and do your job even amid symptoms that mean you should be in bed napping or at the doctor, and especially not transmitting disease to others. Yet, we still roll out of bed and show up much of the time, although 84% reported in the same Softworks survey that employees shouldn't work when sick. So where's the disconnect?

"This is a new term for me, but not a new concept. There has been an ongoing debate for years about encouraging people to stay home when ill versus not 'taking too long' to recover," says Julie Allemagne, a Des Moines, Iowa-based HR professional in production and healthcare. "For employees, it adds the pressure of returning to work when you are not 100%, thereby increasing the length of recovery time. For employers, it adds to the burden of replacing the work to be done."

Essential workers bear the brunt of sick day guilt

What happens when a patient shows up for surgery, or heads to the ER, and there isn't a qualified medical professional there that's ready to treat them? Sickness presenteeism is a symptom of a largely burnt-out and understaffed American medical system, according to Dr. Anita Patel, a double board-certified pediatrician and pediatric critical care doctor in Washington, D.C.

"As an essential worker, despite constantly advising patients to stay home when sick and rest, our seemingly health-centric field always falls short of looking out for their own. I personally have used less than a week of sick days in the seven years that I have been an attending [physician]," she says. One of the reasons is because there's a feeling in the healthcare system that "as long as you can stand upright, you can do the job," she says. "I do have some pretty absurd stories from my pregnancy and going straight from labor and delivery to overnight shifts when I kept going into preterm labor."

She says that it will take time—and be challenging—to fix the culture of overworking when sick and getting burnt out in healthcare, but one aspect of it will continue to get worse.

"Certain periods of time are prone to staffing shortages, such as summer time, holidays and the Omicron surge, when there is literally no one to cover your shift," she says. "It's a reality that will continue to get worse with the rate of physician burnout."

Why do I feel guilty taking a sick day?

So you have your pajamas and your chicken soup, and you can even turn your camera off, right? Some bosses might think, "Then what's the problem?" The problem is it isn't really resting. Sometimes being sick involves sleeping, going to the doctor and other tasks that really can't be done while you are trying to get meaningful work done.

Basically, you can't be a good sick person trying to recover and a good employee at the same time. In fact, the same Softworks study found that 83% of workers felt it was harder to make a decision on days they were sick. A 2022 study in the *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* showed that employees who work while ill often have poor psychological well-being, leading to less job satisfaction and performance. So why are we pressured to cave in to sick day guilt?

"I believe the answer is fear of job insecurity, and blurred boundaries between work and personal life. Employees feel more obligated to work now they are at home, so they work longer hours and employers allow it," says Marla J. Albertie, scientist and founder of Truth Speaks Group LLC, a multimedia coaching company that creates solutions for work-life balance.

Will showing up to work sick be the new norm?

Whether you are on Zoom in your pajamas or throwing on a big cozy sweater to combat that fever to make it through a day in the office, it begs the question: Is this the new normal?

Allermagne says no, it doesn't have to be. "Those of us who have worked globally have seen it in our foreign counterparts. The pandemic taught many to look elsewhere for answers and fight for change. I'm hopeful that our leaders, encouraged by our children who are reaching voting age, will continue to push these boundaries for the U.S. to catch up to other developed countries."

Some are trying to step up for change. In a 2022 European study, researchers found that greater leadership is needed to help develop policy and regulations for when it comes to employees working while ill in a more digitized, post-pandemic world.

Working while sick reflects company culture—here's how to fix that

Like any company culture issue, it might take some time, reflection and diligence to get to the root of the issue before finding solutions. Do you know if your employees feel pressured financially, relationally or otherwise to take a real sick day? Do they have enough sick days? Albertie says, "In my over 20-plus years of leadership, here are 10 things I have seen excel for supporting employees."

Here's how to fix sick day guilt as an employer:

1. Always set clear expectations: Set clear job expectations and goals, ensuring employees understand their roles.
2. Provide regular feedback: Provide constructive feedback and recognize achievements regularly.
3. Work-life harmony/integration: Encourage work-life balance and respect personal time.
4. Ongoing professional development: Invest in employee growth with training and development opportunities.
5. Offer flexible work arrangements: Offer flexible work options when feasible, such as remote work or flexible hours.
6. Offer wellness programs: Implement wellness programs to support physical and mental health.
7. Always have open communication: Foster open and honest communication, allowing employees to voice concerns.
8. Allow for recognition and rewards: Acknowledge and reward outstanding performance and contributions.
9. Have fair compensation: Ensure competitive and fair compensation packages.