



9 Smart Tips for Taking a Mental Health Day That Actually Work...Because you probably need one.

By now you've probably heard that mental health days should be a part of your self-care arsenal. As someone who has needed many of them, I'm a card-carrying member of the Mental Health Day Fan Club. But anyone who has wanted to take a mental health day knows it's not as straightforward as, say, taking a sick day with the common cold.

For one, there are a million reasons why you might need a mental health day. Maybe you deal with a mental health condition that comes with symptom flare-ups that render you unable to get out of bed. Maybe you don't love your job. Maybe you're coming off a high-stress project and need to reset. Or you're going through a breakup! Or dealing with grief! Or need to catch up on the mountain of errands weighing on your mind! Or just can't today! An effective, restorative mental health day will mean something different to everyone, and you have to personalize it to your needs.

And truth be told, mental health days also require strategy. If I took one every time my mental health problems flared up or I felt overwhelmed by the day ahead of me, well, I'd probably have a hard time keeping a job. If you can relate, I have some good news: I picked the brains of mental health experts who have these nine handy tips for making the most out of mental health days, from deciding the best time to take them to how to spend your time when you do.

1. Think of mental health days as a regular tune-up—not damage control.

In an ideal world, mental health days would be something you automatically work into your schedule to prevent you from getting to a place where you desperately need a break, David Klow, licensed marriage and family therapist, and founder of Chicago's Skylight Counseling Center, tells SELF. We'd notice signs of work fatigue early and, instead of pushing through it, proactively take care of our mental health, including the occasional day off filled with restoration and self-care.

But that's not always how it works. We live in a culture that prioritizes productivity over mental health and often requires us to overwork ourselves, so we don't prioritize mental health days the way we would say, taking off for a dentist appointment. And for some people, that always-on mode can lead to burnout. At that stage, mental health days have a very different purpose and effect. "Instead of proactive self-care that will have a cumulative long-term effect, it might just be [about] getting out of the hole," says Klow.

Too often people think they have to be really struggling before they're allowed a break, but taking care of yourself before you absolutely have to is how you avoid burnout, says Klow. So try to think of mental health days as proactive rather reactive. See them as non-negotiable, the way you would jury duty or something similar.

Of course, there is also a case for taking a personal day for mental health reasons that have nothing to do with your job satisfaction, and that's cool too. Like I mentioned, unexpected factors such as illness and life events require taking a break sometimes. Check-in with yourself and your needs—if your gut says you need a mental health day, it likely can't hurt.

2. Consider scheduling ahead.

Proactively saying, "Okay, next Friday I'm going to take off for a mental health day," gives you more of an opportunity to plan exactly how to spend it. There's a time and place for a day of burritoing up in a blanket and streaming TV, but sometimes (and often), those aren't the makings of a good mental health day. "In periods of stress, we're driven toward self-soothing behavior that might not be restorative for us," Paul Lavella Jr., licensed professional counselor and training and development specialist at Delphi Behavioral Health Group, tells SELF.

Since the point of mental health, the day is to positively impact our mental health to some degree, we can benefit from making a game plan for it. The rest of this list is full of ideas of what exactly to plan, but the general gist is that most of the time you want to at least partially fill your day. That doesn't mean doing a bunch of high-energy activities—the point is to be intentional, not necessarily busy. For example, planning to spend the afternoon rereading your favorite book is still a plan.

Of course, there are practicalities to consider. Scheduling a mental health day ahead of time might mean using paid time off instead of a sick day, which might not be something you can do. Plus, there will undoubtedly be times when you need a mental health day unexpectedly. Even in that case, it might still be worth mentally planning ahead for when that happens. Tell yourself, "The next time I need to call out for a mental health day, I want to do XYZ." (And in case you need to hear it, taking a sick day for your mental health is just as legit as taking one for your physical health. You don't need to go into a ton of detail about it with your boss, either.)

3. Actually unplug from work.

Way too many people take time off work only to stay engaged with it in little ways anyway, says Lavella. They check their emails, keep their Slack notifications on, or even just...spend too much time ruminating about their jobs. Which—understandable. If you're taking a mental health day, it's likely you're feeling some sort of way about work. But resist the urge to stay plugged in or stew.

Lavella recommends going screen-free or roping in someone to keep you accountable. If you're with a friend, ask them to keep you in check if you rant too much about work. Or if you feel comfortable, tell a coworker that you're trying to stay off the grid and to feel free to call you out if they see you on Slack.

If you really are having a hard time getting into this state of mind (hi, all you workaholics), remind yourself that this break is beneficial to your work too. Obviously, taking care of your mental health is important for its own sake, but you're not alone if you feel guilty stepping away. Our culture is basically set up to make us feel that way. So if it helps, tell yourself you're really doing Work You a favor by taking the necessary time away. "When we are overworked, it leads to higher rates of worker dissatisfaction and burnout, which lowers productivity," says Lavella.

4. Honor the need to do nothing.

With everything I just said in mind, sometimes a mental health day can be nothing more than weathering the storm of your mental health symptoms and practicing self-care in whatever small ways you can manage. And that's okay. If you're dealing with mental illness or really going through something, a strategically planned mental health day—even if it's filled with soothing activities—might not be in the cards on bad days.

On these days, Klow suggests monitoring your inner voice. “The essence of self-care is positive self-talk,” he says. “When you’re having a hard time, your inner voice needs to be loving and kind and supportive. Don’t beat yourself up. Remind yourself you deserve a break.”

5. Connect with other people.

Social connection is a huge pillar of self-care in general, but I often forget it’s an option for mental health days, given that mental health days often feel synonymous with “hiding from the world.” But reaching out to others, whether by hanging out with your friend who works from home or calling a loved one on their break at work, can be a direct antidote to work-related angst.

Of course, given the likely timing of a mental health day—smack dab in the middle of a traditional workday—you might have to be creative about fostering social connectedness. Personally, I’ve used mental health days to catch up with long-distance friends by writing them emails or letters. Even being around other people can be beneficial. Park out at a coffee shop or library, go window shopping, or find a volunteer opportunity ahead of time.

6. Get into nature.

You probably don’t need me to tell you that the healing powers of nature are plentiful, but how often do you actually take advantage of that? There’s a whole growing scientific field called ecotherapy, and research has shown that more time in nature can be strongly tied to reducing stress, anxiety, and depression in some people.

Depending on where you live, this might be easier said than done. But let nature nurture you doesn’t have to look like going on an exhausting hike or immersing yourself in the wilderness. You can also just find a park or go to a botanical garden. “Some people think getting outside means activity or exercise, but it can also be sitting in nature and just being,” says Lavella.

7. Tackle your to-do list.

Taking a break from work to do more work might not sound like the best use of a mental health day, but honestly, it might be for you. Errands, chores, and other tasks can pile up when we’re buried in our work, and having that hanging over you is stressful as hell. “Feeling like we can’t keep up with our life causes an overflow of anxiety that’s hard to shake,” says Lavella. “Sometimes you need a day to handle the things you’re not handling.”

In the same vein, this could be a good time to tackle tasks related to making a bigger change in the service of your mental health. If you actually kind of hate your job or it’s just not sustainable or healthy for you, you probably should be considering moving elsewhere—but obviously it can be hard to motivate yourself to use your sacred weekends to job hunt. Taking a day off to update your résumé and write cover letters might not be restorative, per se, but it definitely could be transformative in the long run.

8. Do something creative.

If you haven’t noticed, the essence of a good mental health day is often the connection. We’ve covered connecting with others and with the world, but connecting to yourself and with a sense of inspiration is a worthy option too. When you’re feeling fatigued from the work you have to do to make a living, try

creating something for creation’s sake. Write in your journal, whip out those therapeutic adult coloring books you’ve probably heard a lot about, or pick up the knitting you’ve been neglecting. Anything that stretches a different sort of muscle that you don’t regularly get to exercise at work.

In that vein, Lavella recommends doing something you’ve never done before, especially if you’ve been feeling stuck at work. Not only is it good mental exercise for getting unstuck, but it might also create a fun memory that will make you smile, unlike memories of creative things you do regularly, which likely all blend together. “By participating in new experiences, you’re creating a memory associated with joy that you can draw on later,” Lavella says.

9. Remember mental health days aren't all-or-nothing.

As great as mental health days are, remember that they're not going to work miracles. "People hope that if they can load up on restoration all at once on a mental health day, they'll return to work completely reset," says Klow. And when that inevitably doesn't happen, your mental health will take that hit of disappointment. Instead, keep your expectations in check and don't put too much pressure on these days. "They are only little scoops of wellness," says Klow. "You have to make a practice out of it."

As part of this practice, you should also build in mini-mental health activities on the days

you're not taking off. Remember to take breaks, get outside for lunch or a midday trip around the block if you can, and pay attention to signs of fatigue and address them through self-care. The more you infuse your life with small habits of workplace wellness, the more effective your mental health days will be when you take them.