



HEALTHY MINDS
in your workplace

Peter Christison & Associates
Workplace Health Consultancy and Training

Taking effective work breaks

Part of the 'Healthy Minds in your Workplace' series

Can you & your staff take up this healthy well-being challenge?

Background

Research studies including the well known 'Whitehall 2 study' (risk factors for mental ill health) 1999 of civil servants (*Stansfeld S, Marmot M*) have demonstrated the benefits for both employer and employee of taking effective lunch time breaks.

Smaller sample trials of 1500 employees to test the benefits have been run successfully by some insurance companies including Legal and General, published in 2007.

In our 'Healthy Minds in your Workplace' toolkit and training programme, published 2002 we produced a recommended format for employees and employers to use. The research all shows that productivity of an employee reduces during the afternoon period and this increases substantially after mid afternoon without taking an effective break, accelerating towards the end of the working day; the study is not dissimilar to ones run for productivity effectiveness of the 'long working hours culture' produced by the CBI.

What are the benefits to the employer and employee?

The employer

- ✚ Greater and more profitable* productivity
- ✚ Reducing the risk of workplace adverse stress or mental ill health
- ✚ A recognition of having a mentally healthy workplace
- ✚ Feeling more valued
- ✚ Increased loyalty from employee
- ✚ Known as a socially responsible and caring employer
- ✚ Possible lower staff turnover
- ✚ Possibly more likely to 'go the extra mile' for the employer

The employee*

- ✚ Increased profitable* performance
- ✚ Reduction in adverse stress, and possibly mental ill health
- ✚ Contribution to 'work life balance' lifestyle

*The employee for the purpose of this paper refers to everybody working for the organisation.

*Profitability can be measured in non commercial terms and so applies to any type of organisation.

Who should take part?

Everyone in the organisation. Creating a successful organisational practice and culture in any form of workplace well being or health promotion, requires the participation of all those who have any managerial and director role, including HR.

Where the break should be taken?

- ✚ The employer should ideally provide a rest room, accessible to all, with basic kitchen facilities close to or on the premises

Continued overleaf

- ✚ Where no such premises exist a meeting room could be converted into a rest room for 1.5 to 2 hours in the 12.00-2.00PM period, specifically for this purpose
- ✚ If the employer cannot provide these arrangements, employees should be able to access a place to go off site, by providing reasonable extra time for some as they may require longer time to commute to another venue (field workers could use a vehicle if no other possibilities exist)
- ✚ Employers could consider the extra time needed as being equal to the rights of smokers, who take extra breaks, to have 'smoking breaks outside' during the working day
- ✚ The employer should ensure work rota patterns staffing levels exist to provide all with the lunch break
- ✚ The break should be for a minimum period of 30 minutes
- ✚ Employers' should ensure that the lunch break period is an exclusive time for the person and that he or she should not be interrupted by Management to discuss work during this time; the employee should be able to say they are on the break.
- ✚ Workers should not sit at their own desks during the duration of the break.
- ✚ Anyone sitting at their desk should be requested to move by management to an alternative site, computers switched off and voicemail engaged.

What should happen during the lunch break?

- ✚ Apart from eating, it is recommended the employee takes a minimum of 5 minutes, ideally 10, taking a brisk walk in the fresh air, or just going outside.
- ✚ Where this is not possible due to weather, it is advisable for the employee to do stretching exercises for 5/10 minutes
- ✚ Employees could also do relaxation exercises for 10 minutes, some of which can be done intermittently during the course of the working day without the visible awareness of colleagues
- ✚ Meetings held during the lunch break times should be set to ensure that no employee gets no or only 10 minute lunch break at 1.45PM; the break is the priority

If you take a lunch break with work colleagues*

- ✚ Talking about work should be a 'no no'; if you are in employment that requires peer support, other time should be made by the employer to do this
- ✚ Discuss any other matters; if it proves difficult to, provide cards with topics on them to discuss that can be 'pulled out of a hat' to create conversation
- ✚ If your colleague talks about work, it should be possible to encourage them to change the subject or for someone to get up and leave!
- ✚ Encourage work colleagues to get fresh air and go for a walk/ exercise, if needs be 'buddy up' to do this; stretching exercise are a good alternative if for whatever reason walking is not possible

*Advice for Lone workers is part of one of our training courses

Key points

This takes practice! Consistency is important; do not abandon it after one week. Management should take the lead. Corporate publicity of the health promotion initiative is recommended. We can provide amusing small posters for organisations free of charge

Test the results!

The effectiveness can be remotely evaluated for you by us at intervals and an analysis of the evaluations provided at low cost.

Can your organisation take the challenge?

Just follow the guidelines in this fact sheet or if you would like some free advice on implementing it contact me; we can provide amusing small posters for promoting the initiative in your premises.

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