

Winter 2005 Wellness Article

It's the American Way

Use your vacation days...or else. Many doctors are advising Americans to take vacations as an essential measure in staying healthy. Other countries would be included in this finger wagging as well; only they don't need our advice. Americans take the fewest annual vacation days in the industrialized world. Even when doing so, says Alan Muney, M.D., Vice President at Oxford Health Plans, Inc. "will cut down on stress related illness and save health care dollars."

At 42, Italians are taking three times as many vacation days as the average American. France follows closely behind, with the average employee utilizing 37 vacation days. U.S. workers average 13 days.

Even with the option of taking more days off, one in six American employees feel unable to do so. The fear of returning to a staggering pile of paperwork and emails, or the perceived pressure from employers to put in more hours, prevents many employees from taking a much needed vacation. Failure to utilize even a couple vacation days may save billions for employers, but it can result in burnout and high turnover rates as well.

The combination of poor lunch habits, late nights, immobility, and lost sleep has resulted in high levels of stress and symptoms of depression. Employees are beginning to identify themselves and their self-worth with their job performance. "Ultimately, a job shouldn't be the only source of self-esteem," says Connie Byrne-Olson, a mental health therapist at Sioux Valley Hospital. "People who go around saying to themselves or to coworkers, I just can't handle it, it's just too much, I'm just getting swamped, they're actually increasing their anxiety."

Ellen Galinsky, president and co-founder of the Families and Work Institute, offers the idea that technology has changed the expectations of employees by creating a faster pace. "Fifteen years ago you might have been expected to wait a day or so to get back to someone versus now, when people expect an instant answer on email. There's also the loss of jobs. People are much more worried about losing their jobs. It's much more intense at work."

The risk factors of stress and mental exhaustion are very real. They include headache, migraine, eczema, and irritable bowel syndrome. Research at the University of Florida has shown mental stress to decrease blood flow to the heart.

Employees and employers can improve the situation by accepting responsibility for those parts of the equation for which they contribute. Employees have the ability to say no to unrealistic goals, delegate work, and to engage in fulfilling activities outside of work. Employers have the ability to encourage time off, assist in covering work during an absence, and discourage excessive working hours.

Says Dr. Muney, "...taking a vacation is not frivolous behavior. It's essential to staying healthy."