The Importance of Employee Breaks

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Abstract: The occupational and environmental health nurse should encourage workers to take work breaks. Breaks enable all workers to perform at their best.

Keywords: breaks, stress, mental health, health promotion, exercise

In today's busy workplace, many employees have little time to take breaks. According to a 2011 survey by Rights Management, workers are less likely to take lunch breaks. “Fewer than half of employees surveyed say they take a lunch break away from their desk on an average day. Twenty percent eat at their desks, and 13 percent ‘seldom or never’ take time for lunch at all” (Hering, 2011, para 2). Taking regular breaks from mental tasks can give the brain time to think about the task and stimulate new ideas as well as make the task seem less tedious (Hawk, 2016). “Without any downtime to refresh and recharge, we’re less efficient, make more mistakes, and get less engaged with what we’re doing” (Seiter, 2014, p. 5).

Employees who take breaks are more productive and creative. Breaks keep workers focused and engaged in their work which enables them to complete their tasks more accurately with fewer errors (Ferguson, n.d.).

Breaks can also reduce stress. A stressful issue at work can contribute to negative behaviors such as irritability. Skipping lunch frequently can cause stress and fatigue. By taking a break away from the issue or having lunch or a snack, employees return re-energized and able to tackle the next task.

Individuals who take breaks may lower physical ailments because they are sitting less. Taking breaks can relieve eye strain that may occur from looking at the computer screen for a prolonged time. A stretch break for a few minutes can also improve circulation and reduce tension.

One strategy to integrate breaks into the workday includes taking 5-minute breaks throughout the workday, about every hour (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). The breaks should include some movement: (a) take a short walk, (b) stand up and stretch, (c) take phone calls standing up, (d) change positions at the workstation, or (e) drink some water or eat a healthy snack.

Another strategy is to work in small bursts. After working for 25 minutes, take a short 5-minute break. After four of these short work sessions, take a longer break of 30 minutes. Working in compact time periods can eliminate distractions and increase focus. If longer work sessions are needed, 90-minute work intervals can maximize productivity, followed by a short break. An alternative method, 52/17, promotes working with an intense purpose. Individuals work for 52 minutes at a time, then break for 17 minutes (Seiter, 2014), similar to sprints. During the 52 minutes, workers are dedicated to accomplishing tasks, getting things done, and making progress.

A more traditional approach to breaks is to plan two 15-minute breaks per day, one mid-morning and the other mid-afternoon. It is important not to miss the mid-afternoon break as 3 p.m. is considered the least productive time of day (Seiter, 2014). Workers should devise breaks that fit their own schedules and work needs.

Some productivity-boosting activities include the following: (a) take a walk for 20 minutes to increase blood flow to the brain which boosts creative thought and clears the mind; (b) go outside and see some nature; (c) read a non-work book, such as fiction; (d) eat a healthy snack; (e) get a coffee or other drink; (f) doodle; (g) listen to music; (h) exercise, such as a 7-minute workout routine; (i) talk to co-workers or friends; (j) meditate; (k) exercise the eyes by looking at object that is 20 feet away every 20 minutes; (l) take regular vacations; and (m) get enough sleep.

The occupational and environmental health nurse should encourage workers to take breaks, and they need to do the same for themselves. Breaks enable all workers to perform at their best.

References


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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest and received no financial support with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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