MAKE WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY A PUBLIC HOLIDAY: BEING

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The NSW Mental Health Consumer Advisory group [Being](#) has called for a new public holiday to change the conversation about 'sick days' and end stigma about mental health at work.

"If someone gets food poisoning or the flu, or has any physical health issues, employers encourage that person to be off work," says Being CEO Irene Gallagher.

"But if someone suffers depression, anxiety, or becomes so mentally exhausted that they can't get out of bed, a lack of support for mental health sick days means they need to hide their mental health so they can take time to hit the reset button. Invariably they slink back to work full of unwarranted guilt."

Being challenges the NSW and/or Federal government to make a powerful statement in support of mentally healthy workplaces by declaring October 10, World Mental Health Day, a public holiday from 2020. In addition, Being challenges employers to create policies that make it acceptable to take mental health days off work at *any* time of the year.

Opening up to trusted peers is a vital part of suicide prevention, which is the theme of [World Mental Health Day in 2019](#). "If we are serious about encouraging people to talk about how they feel, then let's apply that to the place where we spend most of our waking hours – the workplace," Ms Gallagher says.

"The time has come to confront workplace cultures where people need to hide their lived experiences of mental health issues because they fear being stigmatised or even sacked."

Ms Gallagher says stigma about mental health is so endemic that 'taking a mental health day' is still considered a joke or a euphemism for laziness.

"That thinking perpetuates the dangerous belief that having mental health episodes makes us a burden to others. Hidden episodes can become acute and/or chronic, sometimes leading to suicidal ideation and attempted or actual suicide."

Suicide has surged in NSW in recent years, especially by men. The latest [NSW Government figures](#) say 868 people (including 674 men) died by intentional self-harm in 2017, the highest for 20 years. It is estimated that for every death by suicide, 30 people attempt suicide.

The reality is nearly half of all Australians will experience a mental health condition in their lifetimes and in any given year more than a million will experience anxiety or depression or both. "People with mental health issues are not a burden," says Ms Gallagher. "They are nearly half the population, so they are everyone's loved ones".

Being acknowledges the investment the NSW government made to develop its Mentally Healthy Workplaces Strategy 2018-2022, though we note it did not include specific mentions of employees' rights to take mental health sick leave when needed.

"It's time to turn the tables on that dangerous cliché; employees taking sick days to sustain good mental health is just as valid a reason as physical health," Ms Gallagher says.

There are also business costs to staff remaining at work through a mental health episode. Because people tend to hide these episodes, they can become distracted, unproductive, and even develop physical illnesses. The business world recognises this as 'presenteeism'. A 2016 report calculated presenteeism costs the Australia economy $34 billion a year.

Being urges organisations to show leadership by introducing detailed policies and training to support and encourage mental health sick days. This could involve circulating a policy and even making suggestions for how to use a mental health day (see below).

State governments can help by developing training for managers to write policies, procedures and supportive language around the need to take mental health days.

TEN THINGS TO DO ON A 'MENTAL HEALTH DAY OFF WORK'

1. Have lunch with a trusted friend or family member, or
2. make two phone calls to those people
3. sit in the sun for 30 minutes, maybe reading a book
4. take your shoes off and walk on the grass and/or sand for 30 minutes
5. plan a holiday
6. have a swim, especially in the ocean
7. start sorting out a debt that's been bothering you
8. play a favourite greatest hits album - sing your heart out and dance too!
9. do some gardening or cooking
10. connect with your community through volunteering or other involvement.

INTERVIEWS

To interview **Being CEO Irene Gallagher** contact Communications Officer **Peter Vincent** at peter.vincent@being.org.au or phone Being: 1300 234 630.

ABOUT BEING

Being is the independent, NSW peak organisation for people with lived/living experience of mental health issues and suicidal thoughts. Our primary focus is to ensure the voices of people with mental health issues are heard by decision makers, service providers, and the community. Being advocates for the rights of people with mental health issues and suicidal thoughts to live and participate in the communities they choose. We are a value-based organisation underpinned by recovery-oriented and trauma-informed principles including respect, social justice, transparency, and a belief that recovery is possible for every individual.

Our current projects and policy focus areas include:

- *Establishing a network for peer support workers across NSW*
- *Seclusion and restraint of people affected by the mental health system*
- *Establishing a Youth Committee to consult on public mental health policy*
- *Establishing Consumer-led training and leadership pathways*
- *Trauma-informed care in the mental health system*