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WOULD you take time off work, specifically to care for your mental wellbeing? That's called mental health leave or, sometimes, stress leave.

Some countries like the Netherlands allow workers to take sick leave due to stress or burn out after toiling away at their jobs.

In the United Kingdom, such leave is allowed too – there is no legal difference there between taking days off due to physical or mental health issues, treating both as equally important and in need of time off to be dealt with.

Should Malaysia allow something similar? The answer is yes and no, depending on who you ask.

Workers and experts here want mental health leave to be allowed, but bosses disagree saying that it isn't a good option.

The Human Resources Ministry tells *Sunday Star* that there is currently no need to introduce such policies.

"A major factor in deciding on a government policy is when we have sufficient data to support the need for the policy.

"However, the number of cases reported to the Department of Occupational Safety and Health of psychosocial disease stemming from the workplace is relatively low," the ministry says.

There were only 24 psychosocial cases reported to the department (DOSH) in the last five years, from 2016 to 2021, it reveals.

"The figure is comparatively lower than what has been reported in articles.

"Hence, if there are more cases, we wish to urge employers and medical practitioners to report any psychosocial cases that they believe stem from the workplace," the ministry adds.

For now, it says employers have to secure the welfare of workers against safety and health risks arising out of work activities, under the Occupational Safety and Health Act (Osha) 1994.

"Methods for advocating and preventing psychosocial hazards in the workplace with the law may differ by industry," the ministry says.

In this respect, the employer can refer to the Guidelines for the Prevention of Stress and Violence at the Workplace 2001, published by DOSH at bit.ly/dosh_guide.

Yes to mental health leave

Meanwhile, Malaysian workers are all for mental health leave to keep stress from the workplace in check before it spirals into something severe.

It also doesn't help that the boundaries between work and personal life can be blurred, especially in an era when everyone can be easily reached with a text message or call, says the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC).

"To put it simply, mental health leave should be seen as a prevention measure, and prevention is better than cure," says MTUC president Mohd Effendy Abdul Ghani.

He says every person will face varying levels of mental health issues, be they from their personal or professional lives.

Some workers may face more severe problems like clinical depression or anxiety and may need time off to deal with their mental distress, despite being physically healthy.

"Most often, workers would be faced with stress, which could later develop into physical health prob-

lems such as migraine, fatigue and changes to sleeping patterns.

"The MTUC's stand remains strong that such leave should be given and normalised.

"We call on the government to look after the welfare of the nation, which in return would definitely boost economic gains when the workforce is fit for work," he says.

If such leave is available, Mohd Effendy acknowledges that there will be some who may take advantage of it even if they are not facing mental health issues.

"We propose that employees show evidence such as a doctor's recommendation or report.

"The physician who assessed the employee should provide the recommendation to grant mental health leave and, essentially, rest," he suggests.

However, Mohd Effendy admits that the Malaysian public may not be ready for this shift in how mental healthcare is viewed.

"It is apparent that the stigma of mental health and psychiatric issues is still strong in Malaysia," he says.

As such, he hopes more efforts will be done to educate Malaysians about this subject.

Other steps the MTUC hopes bosses can take are to set boundaries to keep personal and professional lives distinct, and have open discussions with employees on communication out-

side

working hours.

"A union can also be set up within the company to offer emotional support, mentorship and allow sharing of experiences between colleagues," Mohd Effendy proposes.

Employers can also offer free or subsidised rehabilitation activities to boost the mental health of employees; this includes activities such as yoga or organising a sports week, he adds.

Offer help instead

However, employers are not keen on providing mental health leave – they'd rather offer intervention to aid their workers.

Malaysian Employers Federation president Datuk Dr Syed Hussain Syed Husman says having dedicated mental health leave may not be the best way forward.

"It is better for companies to

Should Malaysian workers be given mental health leave?

There are mixed views on mental health leave: Workers say 'yes' to time off to boost mental wellbeing before the stress gets out of hand, but the Human Resources Ministry and employers think differently.

have an in-house counsellor who can offer help and intervention. "When necessary, employers can also use external medical help," he suggests.

Smaller companies without the budget to hire such assistance can refer their staff to see a medical expert should the need arise, Syed Hussain says.

"The more support workers receive from someone like a therapist or an expert, the better it would be for them," he says.

Stressing that bosses must be more attentive to their workers,

HOW ARE SOME COUNTRIES DEALING WITH MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK

Netherlands

> Workers are allowed to take sick leave due to stress-related illnesses like tension complaints, burn out, overexertion, and other reactions to stress.

France

> In 2016, a labour law was passed that included a right to disconnect.

> This right prohibits bosses from requiring workers to be reachable for work-related communication outside of regular working hours or during their time off.

United Kingdom

> Known as stress leave or mental health leave, workers can request time off work to deal with anxiety or stress. > Entitlements for mental health leave are the same as those for sick leave. This means mental health difficulties are treated the same way as any physical illness.

Finland

> In 1996, the Working Hours Pact was passed. > The policy gives employees the freedom to begin or end their workdays three hours earlier or later than standard work hours, to suit their lifestyle.

Sources: World Health Organisation, International Labour Organisation, others

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Syed Hussain says employees are the real assets in a workplace and should be given due importance.

"Mental health issues at the workplace were not seen as a major issue in the past.

"But Covid-19 and the bad economy may have given rise to an increase in this area. So now we need to pay more attention to such matters.

"Companies are looking into this in greater depth, with more corporations creating stronger awareness of and conducting training in these subjects," he says.

At the same time, he believes everybody – including family, friends and the government – needs to play a bigger role in addressing mental health issues early.

"Any form of mental illness will affect work performance.

"At the same time, successful companies are ones that take care of the holistic welfare of the business.

"Therefore, we must address [mental health issues] early to protect the workforce before they become a bigger problem," he adds.

WORKING ON OUR MENTAL HEALTH

