Need a break? Try taking a mental health day

Remember Ferris Bueller's famous day off from high school and his overly dramatic plan to stop and smell the roses?

In today's fast-paced workplace, taking time to stop, step back and regroup is seen by many as an essential part of one's survival.

So what exactly is a mental health day? According to Michael Crabtree, professor in the psychology department at Washington & Jefferson College, a mental health day is an unscheduled day off from work to do something you enjoy, alone or with family and friends. Mr. Crabtree recommends taking a mental health day once in a while to recharge.

In a survey completed by ComPsych, a corporate counseling service, 1,036 nationwide employees were polled and more than 80 percent of those asked admit to taking a "mental health day." Of those surveyed, the reasons given included family/relationship issues, work stress and workload, personal issues which included financial and/or legal problems and lack of physical energy.

David Campbell, senior vice president at ComPsych, stressed the importance of being attentive to employees' needs. He supports mental health days as unplanned days off in response to crisis at home or prevention of work burnout.

"These are days when you have no physical ailment, but you know you cannot focus on the job," said Mr. Campbell, who also advises employers to create a culture where it is acceptable to unplug from work in order to maintain productivity and a healthy workplace.

Jenness Hall, Ph.D., executive and leadership coach of Ateri LLC of Baltimore, is an avid proponent of taking a mental health day.

With clients ranging from information technology executives to museum directors, Ms. Hall said the stress and demands of work make it difficult to remember what the

real problem is.

"Mental health days can give employees 'space' and help them gain the perspective needed to refocus an issue and to (re-prioritize) if necessary," Ms. Hall said.

Though corporations have the elasticity to manage vacations and employee sick days, Ms. Hall said mental health days are not to be confused with spending unused sick time.

"When we talk about taking a mental health day, we are talking about an unplanned vacation day," she said.

She believes that "one or two mental health days a year are acceptable, but people need to be ethical about it." Employees need to consider the impact of their day off in terms of deadlines, responsibilities and co-workers who may feel stressed or overworked, and may resent taking on additional responsibilities.

If taking a mental health day is not an option, Ms. Hall offers the following suggestions to recharge and gain a new perspective while in the workplace setting.

• Take a break.

• Don't sit at your desk all day.

• Eat lunch outside.

• Take a walk and move around to get a change of scenery.

• If you get stuck on a problem, ask a co-worker for five minutes of his or her time to brainstorm options and alternatives.