

## Facing the post-holiday blues<sup>1</sup>

Francisco D. Bretones<sup>2</sup>

The academic year starts and not only students return to class, their parents also return to work.

And that return to work goes hand in hand with one of the most frequent symptoms at this time of year: the post-holiday blues (or post-vacation blues). Vague anxiety, increased irritability, feelings of nostalgia, sleep problems and general discomfort are common in many workers when summer holidays are over.

But the post-holiday blues is not a new concept. In fact, in 1955 the 'holiday syndrome' was already mentioned in the *Psychoanalytic Review* as that syndrome which appeared from a few days before Thanksgiving (fourth Thursday of November) until a few days after the New Year, being linked to the return after a long holiday period.

In the field of Occupational Health Psychology, the importance of holiday and rest is well known as well as their positive consequences for work performance and prevention of negative personal (stress, depression) and organisational (burnout or absenteeism) effects.

Holidays give us the possibility of suppressing stressing activities, reducing our physical and intellectual activity as well as the usual social demands of our daily life, while facilitating our physical and, especially, our psychological recovery. Therefore, rest is not only necessary; its absence may cause serious illnesses and even the worker's death (deaths due to overwork in Japan or *karoshi* are a real example).

But although holidays and rests are important, constant social and work changes have brought about a reduction in our time off work. Thus, certain studies have found that American workers actually enjoy 3.5 less days of holiday than 10 years ago. Moreover, technological innovations have prompted us to spend more time "connected" to our work (either in the office, our house or holiday place).

But what would be the ideal length of holidays? There isn't just one answer. It depends on the individual differences of each person and on the job they perform. Thus, in the case of hard physical jobs, breaks of some minutes are enough to recover from the lack of oxygen, the replenishment of muscle glycogen can last several days, whereas the psychological or emotional recovery will be longer and harder.

In any case, various studies have confirmed that the benefit of holidays on wellbeing reaches its peak at the beginning of the second week of holidays depending on the leisure activities undertaken during that period.

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<sup>2</sup> Francisco Diaz Bretones is associate professor at the University of Granada (Spain) and Head of the Research Group in Organizational Health and Wellbeing.

Despite the beneficial effect of holidays, the return to work produces some symptoms that affect not only our health but also our daily wellbeing. Those symptoms are not a syndrome or an illness, as was diagnosed in the 50s, but they can interfere in the worker's performance until the first two weeks after his/her return, affecting his/her personal life too.

There are several solutions to relieving this post-holiday discomfort and they all lie in the transition between the return to daily life and the previous rest period. Some recommendations could be the following:

- returning from the holiday place 2 or 3 days early;
- adapting sleep hours to the usual working hours;
- starting work calmly during the first days;
- keeping to a sensible work schedule;
- keeping some social and leisure activities;
- practising physical activity out of work, as well as relaxation techniques and/or meditation.

In addition, we should take into account that in some cases, these post-holiday blues symptoms can be aggravated by other organizational problems such as harassment, violence, incivility or conflicts with colleagues or supervisors, in which cases holidays in fact become an escape from conflict situations.