

# The Problem of Presenteeism

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Colleagues who work with runny noses, sore throats and clammy skin are as seasonal as the flu. Yet are sick employees workplace troopers or are they insecure about their jobs? A new study from Concordia University, published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, has found that presenteeism -- attending work when ill -- isn't always a productive option.

Depending on individuals and their roles within an organization, sick employees can be present in body and not in spirit, while others can be ill and fully functional. "Secure employees don't fear retribution for an occasional absence because of sickness," says study author Gary Johns, a management professor at Concordia's John Molson School of Business.

So why do employees with acute, chronic or episodic illness work rather than stay home? Caregivers and people working in early education, for example, report higher rates of presenteeism compared to people from other fields. "Often, a person might feel socially obligated to attend work despite illness," says Johns, "while other employees feel organizational pressure to attend work despite medical discomfort."

As part of his investigation, Johns surveyed 444 people on their job requirements, work experience, absenteeism and presenteeism. Over the previous six months, participants reported an average of three presenteeism days and an average of 1.8 absenteeism days, most of which were attributed to illness.

"Respondents who viewed absenteeism as more legitimate reported more absences, more sick days and fewer presenteeism days," says Johns.

Johns' study found presenteeism was elevated among workers engaged in interdependent projects or teamwork. Those who were insecure about their jobs also engaged in more presenteeism. "Presentees felt a compulsion to attend despite illness," says Johns.

According to this and previous studies, presenteeism is more frequent when people face job insecurity and impermanent job status. Absenteeism, however, is more elevated in unionized work settings or when unemployment is low.

Organizations, employers and human resources departments have traditionally examined ways to curb absenteeism, but have paid little attention to presenteeism. "Estimating the cost of absenteeism is more tangible than counting the impact of presenteeism," says Johns. "Yet a worker's absence — or presence — during illness can have both costs and benefits for constituents."

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