

Why stressed workers need four-day weeks – not wellness trends

Spiralling work pressures make us sick. A debate about shorter hours is the answer, not gong baths or 'mindful minutes'

The latest wellness trend to assail us? "Gong baths." For those unfamiliar with the term, a gong bath aims to provide spiritual and physical relaxation via long, calming notes played on a large metallic percussive instrument. Yes, it is just a gong and people are chilling out like crazy by lying down next to one while it's being bonged.

And you will not be surprised to learn that large corporations have rushed to embrace gong baths. Some top firms are reportedly booking sessions with gong masters in their endless pursuit of workplace wellness.

This is yet another example of businesses attempting to disguise the fact that the pressures of modern work – particularly in high-pressure sectors such as tech, finance and the media – are increasingly toxic and may even be killing us.

Jeffrey Pfeffer, author of *Dying for a Paycheck*, says that the stress, anxiety and depression being generated by modern work practices are responsible for \$200bn (£160bn) in healthcare costs in the US alone; work is directly responsible for the deaths of 120,000 workers there each year, he suggests. And heart attacks peak on Monday mornings in response to demanding work and harmful bosses.

It has been suggested that since the arrival of email on smartphones the average working day has expanded from seven and a half hours to nine and a half hours a day, raising stress levels. But rather than deal with never-ending electronic demands, employers often seek to distract from the problem with wellness trends. Workers at one big tech company told me they were invited to take a "mindful minute" at the start of every meeting – the implication being that 60 serene seconds would compensate for the numerous issues of the rest of the day.

There is probably nothing bad about seeking escape in gong baths, but the suggestion that it could undo the mental damage of modern office work is an insult. With every mindful minute, every gong bath, we move away from an honest conversation about how we need to change work. Is the answer to the electronically elongated working day that we trade down to a four-day week? Should we switch to a six-hour day? These are meaningful debates that need to be had – but we are unlikely to start them over the bonging of a gong.

By Bruce Daisley, adapted from *The Guardian*, August 28th, 2019

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