

It's not just a smoke break

Reclaiming healthy pauses in hospitality



In hospitality, the idea of a 'break' is often loaded.

It's the smoke break squeezed in between a lunch rush and back-to-back check-ins. The rushed coffee gulped standing up. The glass of wine after a shift that feels less like a treat and more like a release valve.

We're experts at curating unforgettable guest experiences, yet when it comes to our own teams' wellbeing, rest is rarely part of the plan.

Across the sector, breaks are **inconsistent, quietly stigmatised or absent altogether**. Pausing is seen as indulgent. Carrying on, no matter the cost, is applauded. But this rhythm isn't sustainable. Not for people. Not for performance. And not for the future of our industry.

What if we reimagined breaks as something more? Not just a chance to step outside, but a **built-in opportunity to reset, protect mental health and nurture a better workplace culture**.

This report explores how people and culture teams can lead that shift by embedding everyday pauses that protect people and power performance from the inside out.



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The state of breaks in hospitality today

In hospitality, breaks aren't built into the system. They're taken in whatever small gaps the day allows.

Often, the most consistent route to rest in this sector isn't a scheduled pause. It's a cigarette. Smoking has become the unofficial pass to step away, the only kind of downtime that doesn't need to be justified.

- ✓ **Hospitality workers are three times more likely to smoke** than those in other industries (Scottish Licensed Trade News, 2024).
- ✓ **Smoking is socially accepted as a 'valid' break**, whereas non-smoking pauses can feel unjustified or even suspicious.
- ✓ **If you don't smoke, you're expected to power through**. Sitting down without reason is noticed. Stepping away without a cigarette in hand can feel like a statement.

This creates a culture where carrying on, not pausing, becomes the norm. But this constant motion doesn't mean people are okay. It means stopping isn't culturally accepted.



Patrick Howley from **So Lets Talk** describes smoking not as the problem, but a symptom of deeper dysfunction.



We're still wearing badges of honour for really disruptive habits. People are starting to smoke or continue smoking just to access rest. That shows how unhealthy our work environments really are

The pressure builds silently:

- ✓ In 2024, **85% of hospitality workers reported symptoms of poor mental health**, including stress, anxiety, burnout or depression (**Planday, 2024**).
- ✓ **Healthy breaks are inconsistent or absent**, leading people to rely on coping strategies like caffeine, alcohol, nicotine or digital distraction.
- ✓ These habits may offer short-term relief but **they mask long-term fatigue and erode wellbeing over time**.

For people and culture teams, this reveals both a problem and a possibility:

- ✓ The way we **design, talk about, and protect breaks** sends a powerful message about what and who we value.
- ✓ **Reframing breaks as essential**, inclusive and health-supporting can create real cultural change from the inside out.

The science of pausing: Why microbreaks matter

In high-pressure environments like hospitality, recovery doesn't have to mean stepping away for half an hour. The real impact lies in short, frequent pauses that allow the body and mind to reset before stress takes hold.

Microbreaks, even those lasting **just a minute or two**, have been found to **reduce cortisol levels** and **improve cognitive function**. When we pause, we give the brain a chance to shift gears, helping restore focus and reduce the mental clutter that builds during back-to-back demands.

It's not just the brain that benefits. Physically, short breaks ease the strain of being on your feet, allowing posture to recalibrate and fatigue to soften. Psychologically, they help regulate mood, reduce irritability and restore a sense of control which is often lost in the pace of service.

The benefits of microbreaks include:

- ✓ **Lower stress levels** and improved emotional regulation
- ✓ **Sharper focus** and better accuracy under pressure
- ✓ **Reduced physical strain** from standing or repetitive movement
- ✓ **Higher overall energy and productivity** across shifts

Patrick adds that resilience should not be measured by how much pressure someone can take, but by how quickly they can return to baseline.

Research backs this up. Microbreaks have been shown to **improve concentration and accuracy, particularly during repetitive or mentally demanding tasks (PLOS One, 2022)**. The most effective pauses are regular, brief and matched to individual needs, whether that means movement, connection or quiet (**Harvard Business Review, 2023**).

It's not about stopping work.
It's about sustaining it.

Frequent, intentional pauses help people return to their roles with clarity and energy. They support better decision-making, stronger communication and healthier team dynamics.

When breaks are treated as fuel, not failure, **performance does not drop. It improves.**



Break barriers:

Why teams struggle to rest

Even when people know that breaks are important, actually taking one is a different story. In hospitality, many teams operate in a pace that rewards constant motion and quietly punishes pause.

Several factors make regular rest difficult:



Cultural pressure

Being busy is worn like a badge of honour. Pausing, especially without a cigarette in hand, can feel like weakness.



Operational strain

Tight rotas and limited cover mean breaks often rely on rare lulls or team goodwill.



Emotional discomfort

Without a visible reason, stepping away can feel indulgent. Smoking legitimises the pause. Stretching or sitting does not.



Leadership modelling

When managers don't take breaks or use dismissive phrases like "wish I had time for that," it sends the message that rest isn't really allowed.

Surveys show that most people understand the value of breaks and want more support to take them:

82 %
*of UK workers say regular breaks
improve productivity*

70 %
*believe employers should provide proper
spaces to rest (Compass Group UK, 2023)*

When those spaces are missing, rest slips away and so does the resilience teams need to thrive.

Break myths hold teams back:

- ✓ There's no time
- ✓ Only smokers need breaks
- ✓ Breaks reduce productivity
- ✓ If no one else is resting, neither should I

Myths like these run deep, but they're not unchangeable. With the right support, messaging and role modelling, we can shift the story. Because rest isn't a reward. It's how we maintain good work.



The new break culture: From 'smoke break' to 'reset ritual'

It's time to redefine what a break looks like and who it's for.

A modern, wellbeing-first break isn't about disappearing for half an hour or proving you've earned it. It's about **building short, healthy rituals into the flow of the working day**. Rituals that reset the nervous system, restore energy and help people re-enter service with focus and calm.

Crucially, they should be accessible to everyone, not just smokers or senior staff. And they don't need to be long to be effective.

Here are just a few examples of what a **small, intentional reset can look like**:

- ✓ **Two minutes of deep breathing** in the staff room
- ✓ **A quiet stretch or walk** around the venue
- ✓ **Listening to a favourite song** before a shift change
- ✓ **Drinking a glass of water**, uninterrupted
- ✓ **Standing outside for fresh air**, phone-free

Language helps shape behaviour. Swapping terms like smoke break for fresh air break or reset moment removes stigma and signals that pausing is both normal and encouraged.

Patrick suggests normalising the phrase ‘I need five minutes to regulate.’ This removes the pressure to explain or justify and invites a broader, more inclusive understanding of what recovery looks like.

To support this cultural shift, it also helps to create space for open, two-way communication. Digital tools like **Mapal Engagement** can help make break culture stick by supporting the habits that surround it. For example:

- ✓ **Group channels and wellbeing forums** can be used to promote peer-led reminders, tips and encouragement around rest
- ✓ **Suggestion boxes and pulse surveys** allow staff to share what they need to feel comfortable taking a pause
- ✓ **One-to-one and team chat functions** create accessible, low-pressure ways to request a breather or offer cover
- ✓ **Manager broadcast tools and announcement posts** can spotlight company-wide wellbeing goals and team success stories that reinforce recovery as a shared value

When people are heard, informed and involved in shaping their experience, they are more likely to feel safe stepping away when they need to reset.



Leadership's role in normalising recovery

Culture doesn't shift from the bottom up. It starts with what leaders model, permit and protect.

When managers power through back-to-back services without pause, it sends a clear message that rest is for later, not for now.

But the reverse is also true. When leaders pause, name it as a reset and return with focus, it gives others permission to do the same. It shows that recovery isn't weakness. It's part of how we do great work.

Normalising breaks means building a culture of psychological safety, where people don't feel judged or guilty for stepping away. And that takes intention.

Leaders can support this shift by:

- ✓ **Modelling healthy pauses**
Step away visibly, even for a few minutes, and talk about it openly
- ✓ **Naming the break**
Use terms like reset, pause or fresh air moment to signal purpose
- ✓ **Avoiding guilt-trip language**
Remove dismissive comments like "some of us are too busy for that"
- ✓ **Encouraging balance**
Remind teams that rest helps them perform, not fall behind
- ✓ **Celebrating recovery**
Acknowledge when someone returns from a break recharged and ready

Patrick adds that a healthy culture is built on values and behaviours. It is not enough to name wellbeing as a value. Leaders must attach visible actions to those values and make them part of daily operations.

Final thoughts: Rest is strategic

Sustainable hospitality starts with sustainable people.

The best teams are built not just on skill and speed, but on rhythm. The ability to recover, reset and come back ready.

In a post-pandemic world, employees are re-evaluating what they want from their careers. Burnout is no longer seen as the cost of entry. The employers that prioritise recovery, protect wellbeing and normalise healthy pauses will be the ones that stand out.

Breaks are not downtime to minimise.

They're a strategy to maximise the energy, clarity and care that define truly great service.





Next steps

Make space to reset

Normalising rest fuels sharper thinking, stronger teamwork and better service.

Our Engagement tool keeps teams connected with simple, consistent communication from encouraging pause-positive habits to supporting smoother shift coordination and feedback.

[Book a demo today](#)

