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The psychology behind the subtle pressure to work when sick

Should you take a sick day or tough it out? The answer isn't always clear.



By Georgina Kenyon
14 October 2016

If you thought a 'wickie' was something to do with cricket or a famous website, you're probably one of the many people who trudge into work when you're feeling sick.



Is there an art to knowing when, exactly, it's time to stay home?

Otherwise known as presenteeism, pulling a wickie might not win you favour at the office. Recent research suggests that if you work while sick you will perform more poorly, you're more likely to make errors and you'll be less vigilant. Oh, and you'll probably annoy your colleagues with that hacking cough and constant nose-blowing.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are those annoying colleagues who take a 'sickie', complaining even though they're not all that unwell.

Most of us fit somewhere in between the two. But when there's peer pressure — like the praise heaped on a colleague who shows up, despite having some version of what seems like the plague, or a boss who subtly makes it clear that taking a sick day is frowned upon — along with concern about job security and pay, deciding when you're sick enough to stay home isn't as easy as it should be.



Peer pressure, praised heaped on sick colleagues who come to work and worries about job security can make it hard to take a sick day. (Credit: Alamy)

Is there an art to knowing when, exactly, it's time to stay home?

The psychology of presenteeism

Why do people feel obliged to go to work when sick? It is a combination of **high job demands, stress and job insecurity**, according to the University of East Anglia.

Common sense should dictate whether you stay home when feeling ill, but managing your boss is another story. There is no objective measure of how sick a person should be before they stay at home, making it harder to make the call to do so.

“I have also found that people who are very involved in their work and have workaholic tendencies are less likely to take time off sick, no matter how ill they feel,” says Gail Kinman, professor of occupational health psychology at the University of Bedfordshire in the UK.



US candidate for president, Hillary Clinton, attended a September 11 ceremony in New York while sick with pneumonia. She took the next few days off to rest. (Credit: Getty Images)

As well, we look to our bosses as role models for sickness behaviour.

“If your manager commonly engages in presenteeism, they may expect staff to do the same and their staff may be reluctant to take time off sick,” Kinman adds.

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This is why hard-driving, Type A bosses might seem to lack empathy. If you think the boss could be less understanding of that flu you’ve come down with, you’re less likely to call out sick, even

if you should.

But according to other research from the University of East Anglia, people who feel under pressure and severely stressed by colleagues or bosses will turn up to work when sick, as well those who are highly motivated. Employees feeling harassed or discriminated against by **will feel more anxious about asking for leave.**



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Back to bed

It's just a little cold, you're thinking. It's only been a day or so of sneezing and stuffiness, you tell yourself. And off to the office you go. But, in reality, when you are mildly sick you might be better off staying home to rest before you feel totally rotten.

Michael Tam, staff specialist in general practice at Fairfield Hospital, in Sydney, Australia advises taking time off at the beginning of a bad cold, especially if you work in an industry where you will be in close contact with lots of people, such as hospitality, or in a caring role.

Even if you work in an office, Tam offers the same advice, since staying away will prevent the spread of the illness. Got a stomach bug? Stay away from work for two days after vomiting and diarrhoea stops.



In some countries, there is no guaranteed paid sick leave. (Credit: iStock)

The pay problem

In many countries, you're guaranteed some paid sick time by law in full-time jobs and in some permanent part-time roles, such as in Australia. In other countries, like the US and some Asian nations, there are few, if any, guarantees. So, it makes sense that in some sectors where your pay or job security depends on showing up, it's more likely you'll go to work ill, according to Kinman's research.

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Where your pay or job security depends on showing up, it's more likely you'll go to work ill

Even in many developed countries where there are relatively supportive laws for employees, like in Singapore, an employee is not entitled to paid sick leave until they have worked in a job for at least three months.

“This is a particular problem where workers are not paid while off sick, if their organisation is understaffed, if there are punitive sickness policies, or if they work in helping professions such as health and social care,” Kinman says.

This is a dilemma that some contractors and freelance workers know well. It's estimated that in Australia, 24% of workers are on some type of casual contract. And a [recent study by the](#)

Freelancers Union in the US shows 35% of workers are now contract or freelance (read: on your own when it comes to pay).

“If I don’t show up, I don’t get paid,” says Sean Newman, a home builder in London.

When you’re truly sick

- Communicate immediately with your manager
- Be firm about your decision to stay home
- Have a plan for work you need to complete
- Manage your boss’s expectations for returning to the office

Source: Gail Kinman

Meanwhile, Nicole, a government worker in Sydney, Australia who did not want her last name used, says that often when she has a cold, she feels capable of working a half day at home, but not a full day in the office. The commute to work and sitting in meetings when you find it hard to stand up on your feet from a bad cold can make the sick feeling worse. But her line manager has made it clear that there’s no middle ground, telling everyone “staff could either be sick at home or well in the office”, she says.

Such rules make it difficult for staff to feel on top of their work, she says. “Life is not always so black and white.”

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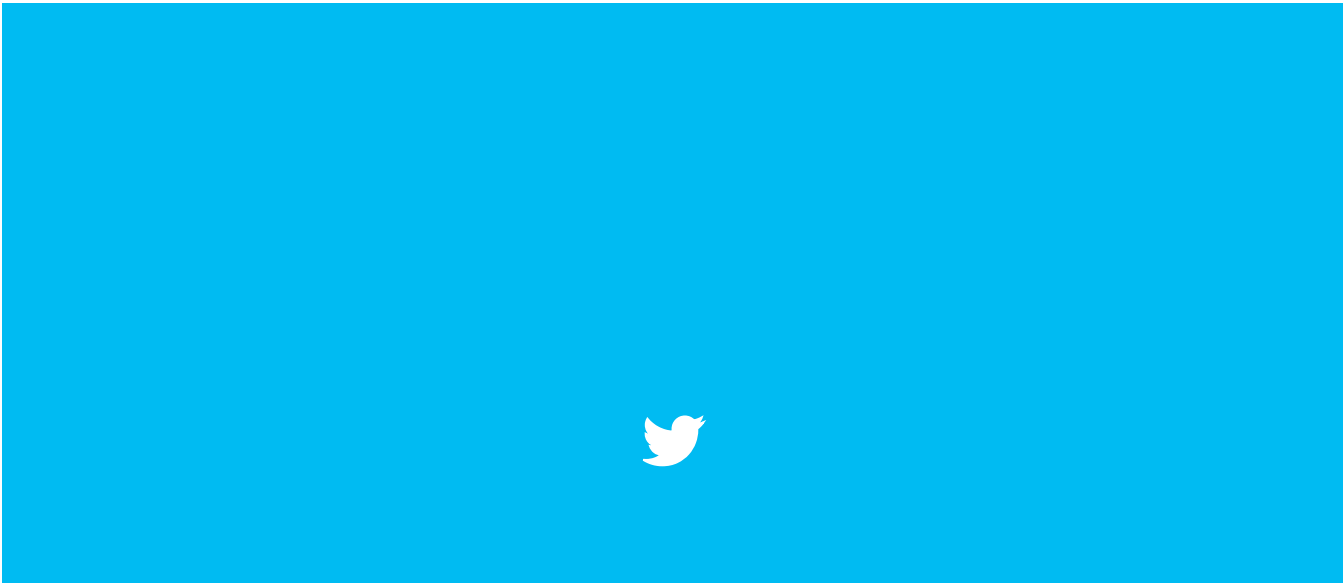
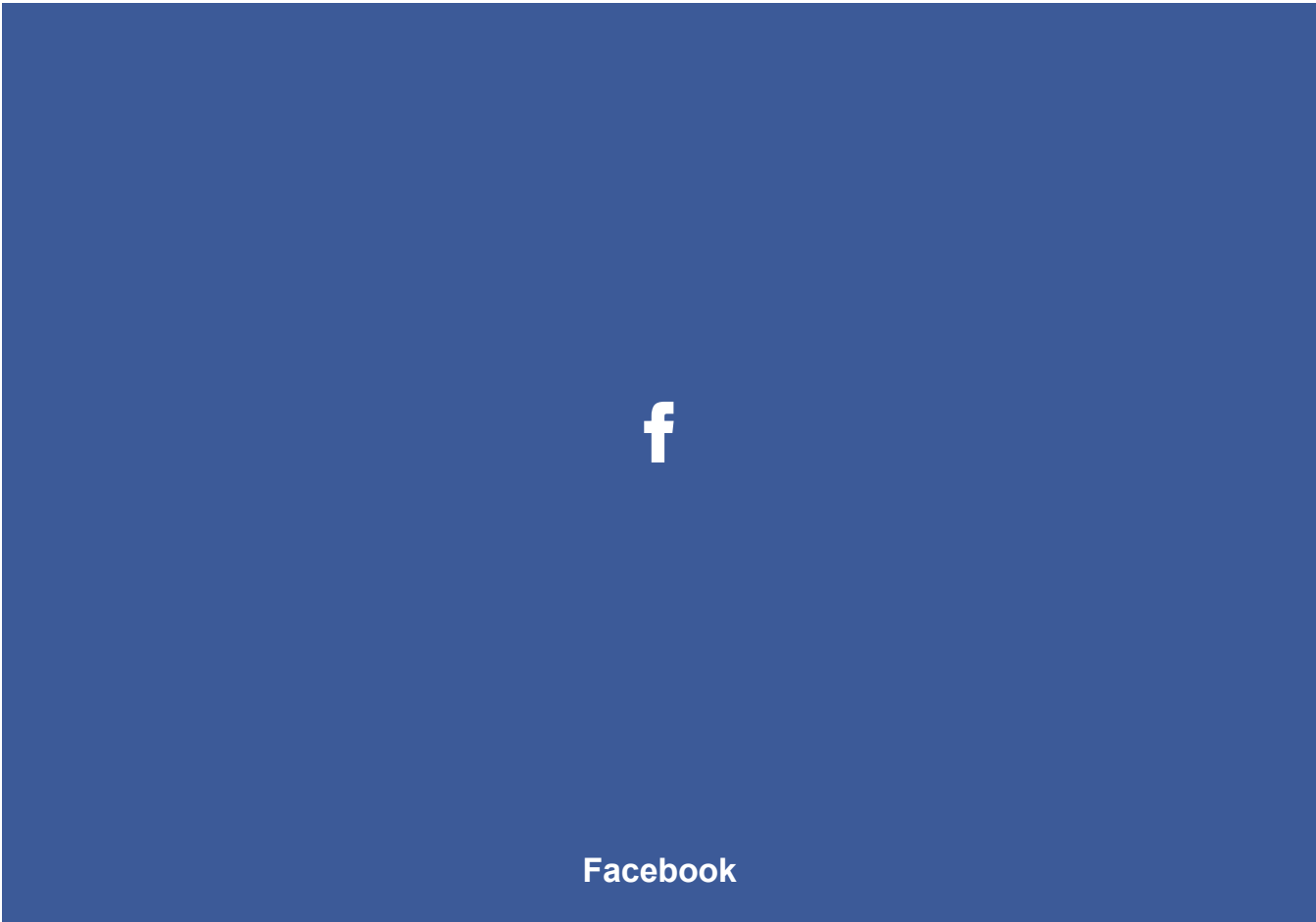


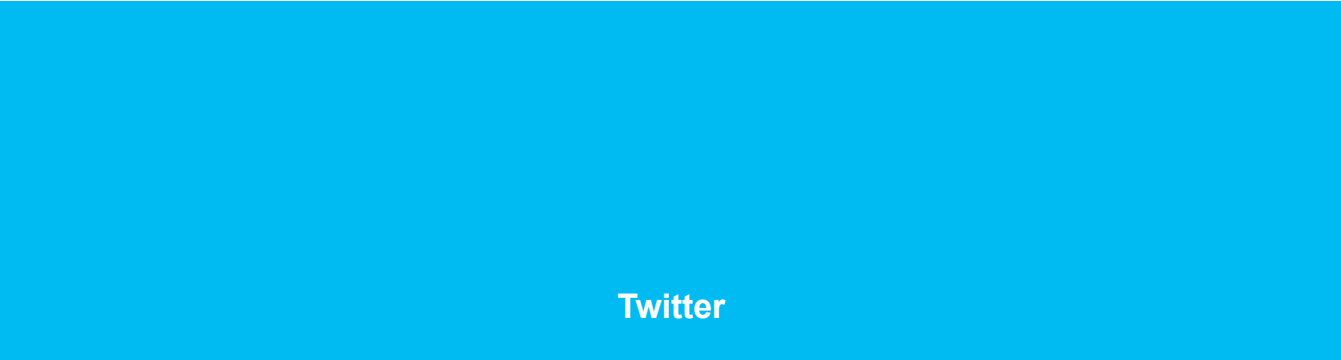
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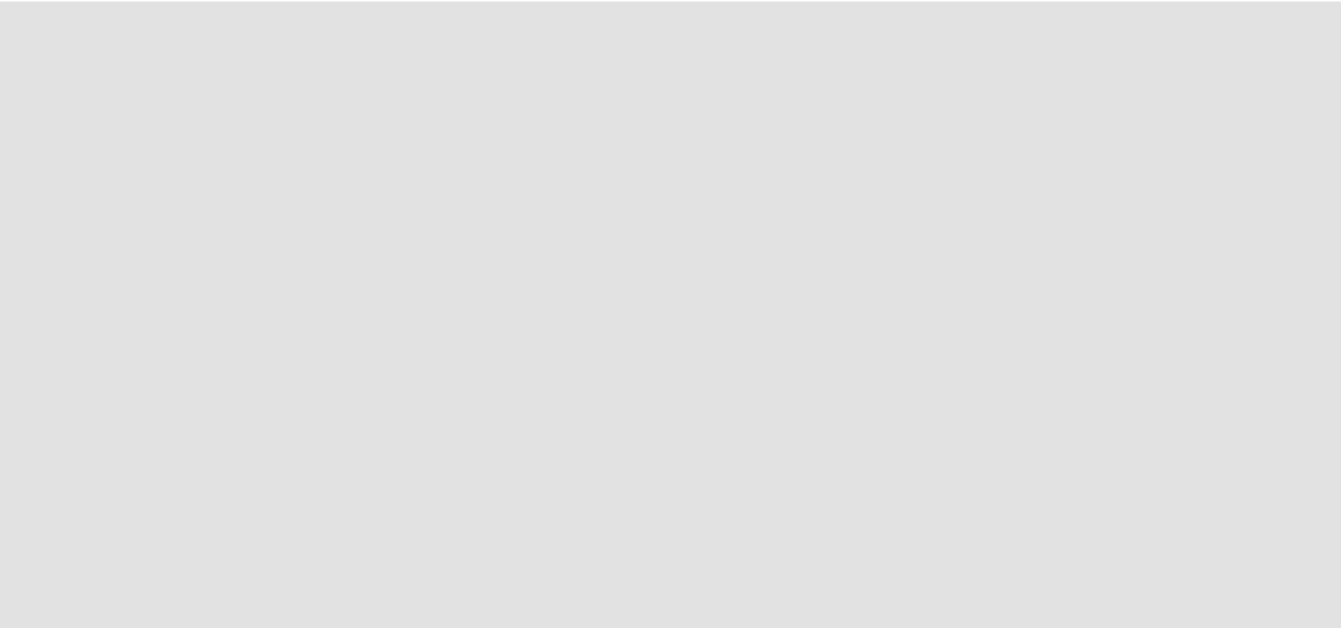
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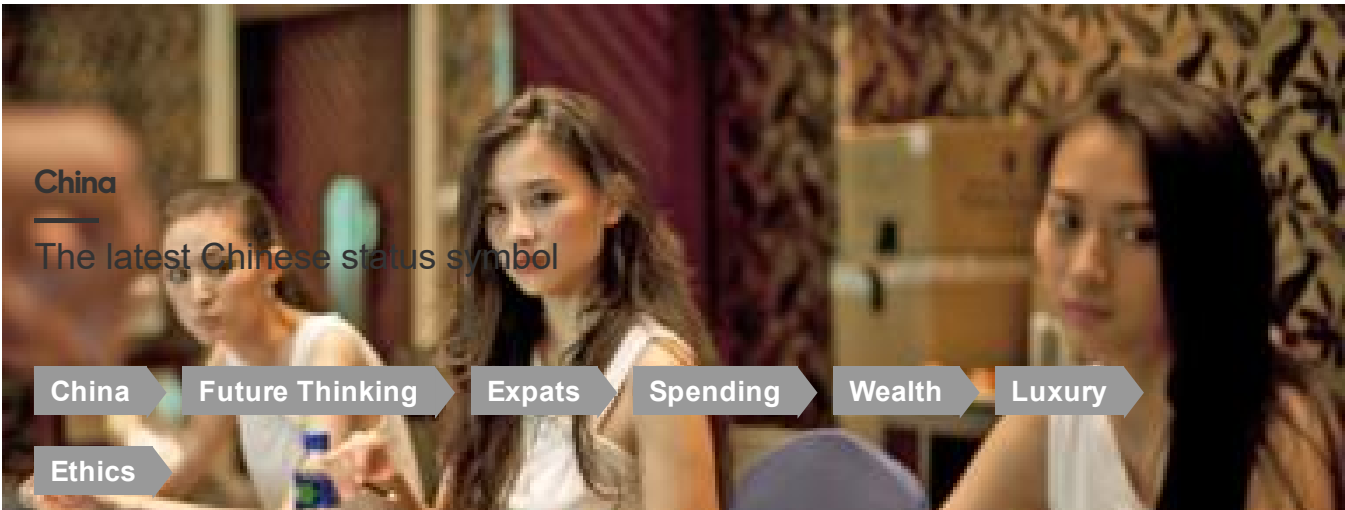
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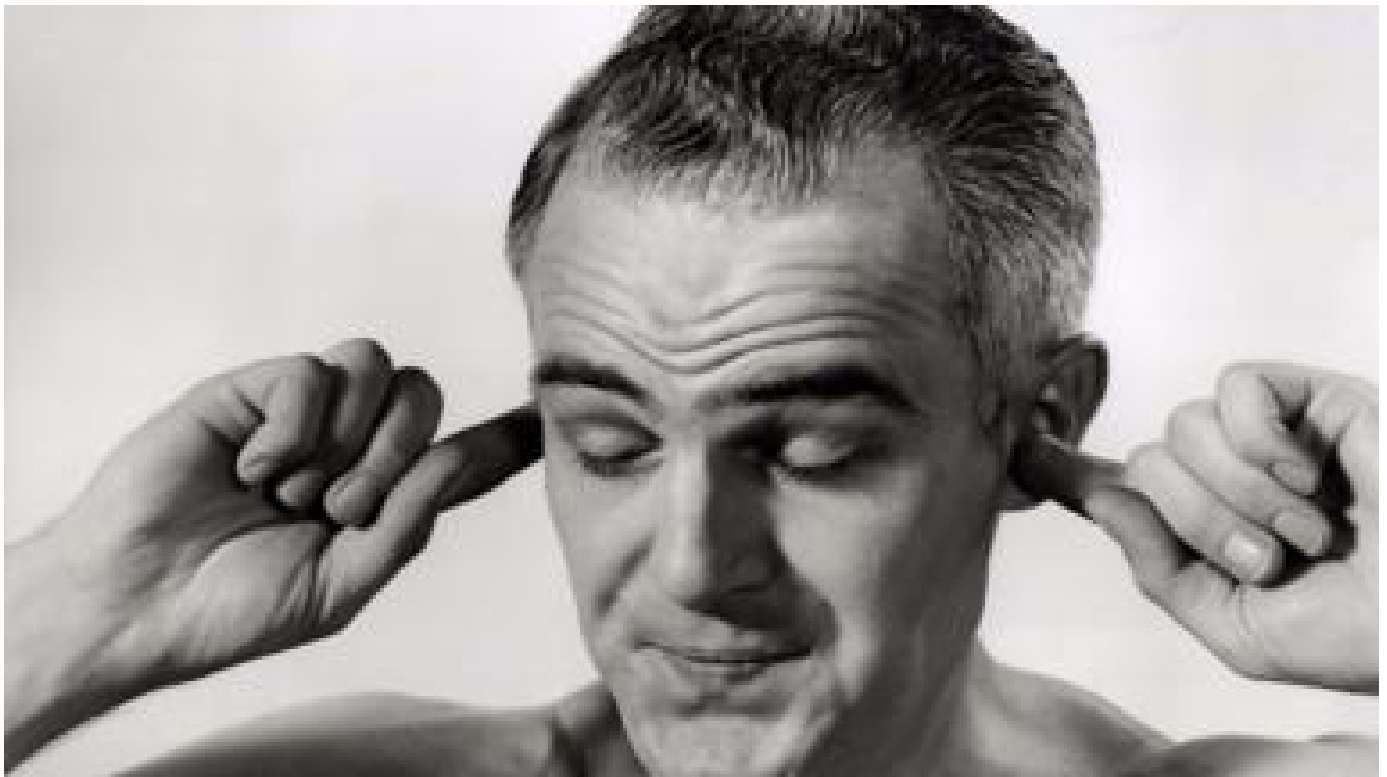
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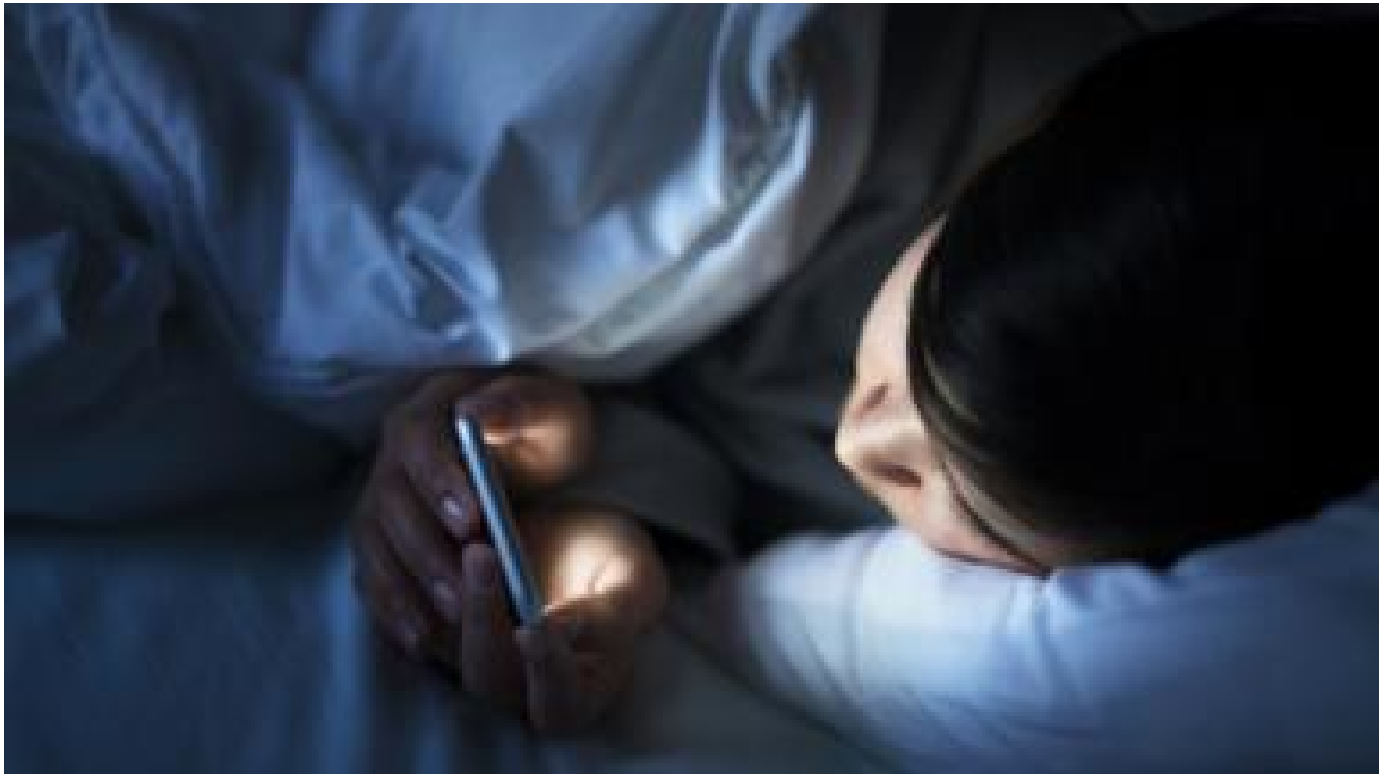
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