

The Toilet-Cubicle Reset

WHEN FIVE MINUTES ALONE IS THE ONLY WAY YOU CAN REGULATE AT WORK

Sometimes the toilet is not really about needing the toilet

For some people, the workplace toilet becomes the only place in the building where they can close a door and know that, for a few minutes, nobody is expected to speak to them. No eye contact. No questions. No telephone. No colleague appearing beside the desk. No need to arrange the face, respond quickly or look as though everything is manageable. The cubicle becomes a tiny temporary boundary between the person and the working day.

People rarely talk about this. They may worry that it sounds strange, unprofessional or as though they are avoiding work. Yet repeatedly disappearing to the toilet can sometimes be a sign that somebody has no other private way to regulate. They may be reducing sensory input, recovering from a difficult interaction, preventing tears, trying to stop a panic response, taking off a mask for a moment or simply finding five minutes in which nobody needs anything.

If the only place somebody can regulate is behind a locked toilet door, it may be worth asking what the rest of the workplace is asking them to hold.

Why privacy can matter so much

Regulation often requires a temporary reduction in demand. A person may need silence, stillness, fewer eyes on them, lower social expectation or simply the knowledge that they cannot be interrupted. In an open-plan workplace, those conditions can be surprisingly difficult to find. Break rooms may contain colleagues. Corridors involve conversation. Even sitting quietly at a desk can invite questions about whether something is wrong.

A toilet cubicle offers a socially acceptable reason to disappear. Nobody usually asks why the door is closed. That privacy can become important for people who otherwise feel watched, interrupted or expected to remain available.

Neurodivergence and sensory overload

For autistic and ADHD employees, the working environment may involve continual sensory and cognitive input: conversations, fluorescent lighting, movement, phones, smells, competing tasks, social interpretation and frequent transitions. A few minutes in a small enclosed space can reduce some of that input. The person may not consciously think, 'I am regulating my nervous system.' They may simply know that they need to get away.

The behaviour itself is not necessarily the problem. The more useful question is why the person needs to leave the working environment in order to feel able to continue.

When you are trying not to cry

The toilet can also become somewhere to contain emotion. A difficult email, criticism, conflict, grief, anxiety or accumulated pressure may bring tears that the person does not feel safe showing at work. They go to the cubicle, cry quietly, wash their face and return as though nothing happened. Colleagues may never know that the person used their break simply to become presentable again.

What Happens in Those Five Minutes?

A reset does not have to be complicated. Often the benefit comes from temporarily stopping incoming demands. The person may sit, stand, breathe, close their eyes, stretch their hands, loosen clothing, stop forcing eye contact, allow their face to relax or simply experience silence. The nervous system is given a brief opportunity to come down from constant alertness.

If the cubicle is your reset space

Try noticing what actually helps rather than automatically reaching for your phone. Scrolling can sometimes add more input when the brain is already overloaded. You might instead place both feet on the floor, unclench your jaw, let your shoulders drop, notice whether you are too hot or cold, and ask: 'What am I trying to recover from?' You do not need to force deep breathing if that feels uncomfortable. The aim is simply to reduce demand.

Ask what happened just before you came here

Was it a meeting? Too much noise? A conversation? Being interrupted repeatedly? Trying not to cry? A task you could not start? Feeling watched? Having to speak when your brain needed quiet? If the same trigger appears repeatedly, those five-minute breaks can provide useful information about what is difficult in the workplace.

A private reset should not require pretending you needed the toilet

A psychologically safer workplace can provide legitimate ways for employees to step away briefly. That might be a quiet room, a low-stimulation area, flexible short breaks, access to outdoor space or simply a culture where somebody can say, 'I need five minutes to reset,' without having to provide a detailed explanation.

This can be particularly important as a reasonable adjustment for some disabled or neurodivergent employees. The exact adjustment will depend on the person and their role, but the principle is straightforward: regulation should not have to be hidden.

When managers notice repeated toilet breaks

Approach with care. There may be physical or medical reasons for frequent toilet use, and employees should not be required to disclose private health information casually. If there is a genuine workplace concern, avoid beginning from suspicion or embarrassment. A broader conversation about whether the person has what they need to work comfortably may reveal more than focusing narrowly on bathroom time.

Do not turn somebody's only safe five minutes into another place where they feel watched.

Could the workplace offer somewhere better?

A quiet room does not need to become an elaborate wellbeing suite. It needs to be genuinely usable: private enough to reduce social demand, not routinely used for meetings, and available without somebody having to justify distress. For some workplaces, access to an outdoor area, unused office, prayer or reflection room, or agreed brief break arrangement may provide a realistic alternative.

When Five Minutes Is No Longer Enough

Occasional regulation breaks can be healthy. But if somebody is going to the toilet repeatedly because they feel close to panic, cry several times a day, need increasingly long periods away from their workstation or cannot return without forcing themselves, the issue deserves more attention.

Look for the pattern underneath

Does it happen after interactions with one person? During particular shifts? After meetings? When the office is busiest? When workload increases? After receiving feedback? When sensory input builds? A simple private note of what happened beforehand and how you felt afterwards can help identify whether the pressure is emotional, sensory, relational or organisational.

What might need to change?

Possibilities could include quieter working space, noise reduction, protected breaks, clearer communication, fewer interruptions, predictable meetings, written instructions, flexible working, workload review or another reasonable adjustment. If the person is escaping bullying, harassment, discrimination or a persistently unsafe environment, regulation strategies alone are not an adequate response. The workplace problem needs addressing.

Managers: be curious about environments, not just behaviour

When an employee repeatedly needs to leave the workspace, it can be easy to focus on attendance at the desk. A more useful question may be: 'What is happening here that makes being at the desk difficult?' This does not mean ignoring operational needs. It means recognising that sustainable performance is more likely when the underlying barrier is understood.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

There is something quite telling about needing to lock yourself in a toilet simply to have permission to stop for five minutes. You may have become so used to it that you do not even think of it as a coping strategy. You just know that when everything becomes too much, that is where you go.

I would want you to notice those moments without embarrassment. What are you escaping from? What are you recovering from? What becomes possible behind that closed door that does not feel possible at your desk? Your answers may tell you far more about what you need than simply trying harder to stay in the room.

Five minutes alone can be a useful reset. But you deserve a working environment where regulation does not have to be disguised as a toilet break.

A five-minute reset check-in: What happened immediately before I needed to leave? What did my body feel like? What became easier once I was alone? What would have helped me stay regulated without needing to hide? If you notice the same answer repeatedly, consider whether a workplace conversation or adjustment could reduce the pressure.

Important: This resource provides general wellbeing information and does not replace individual medical, psychological, occupational-health or employment advice.