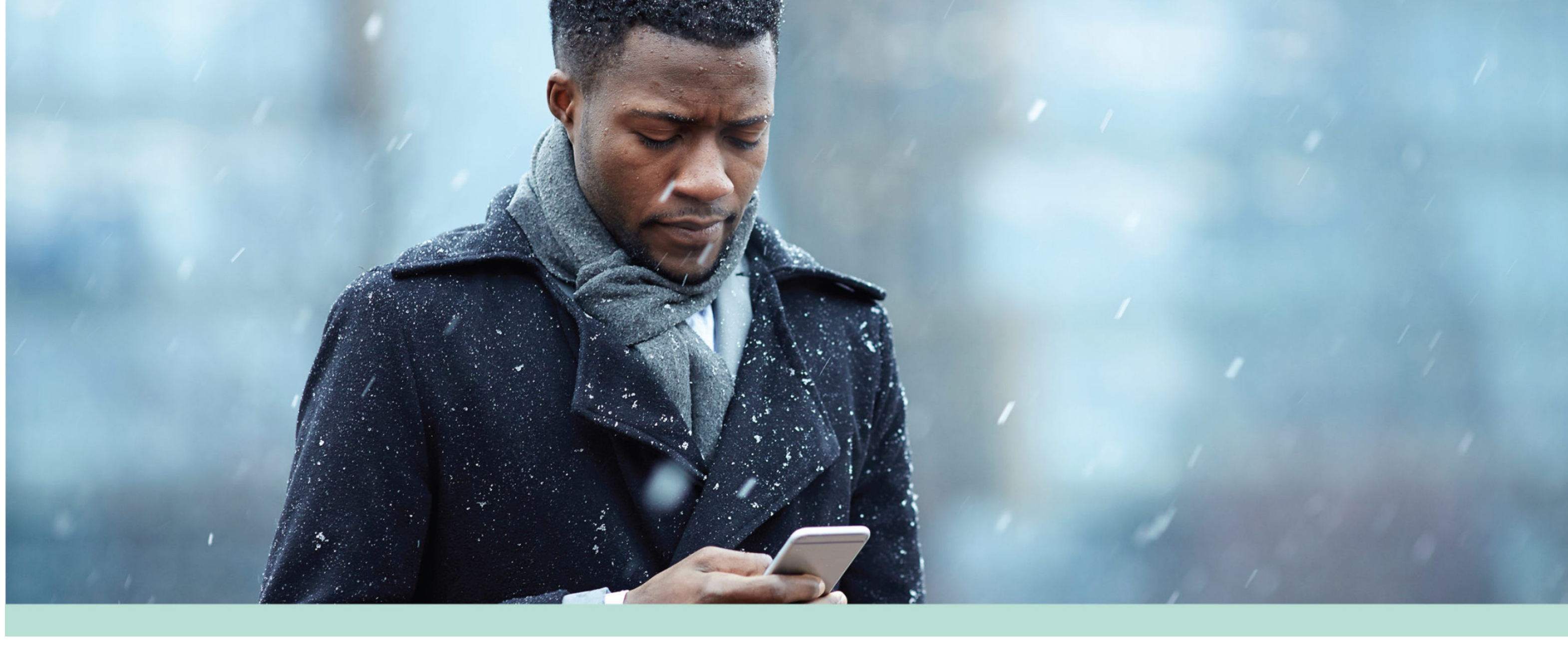


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How to boost employees' mental health during the winter months

Frolicking in a winter wonderland isn't everybody's favourite way to spend the colder Canadian months. Many prefer to keep warm by bundling up on the couch, but often lose out on opportunities to exercise and get the blood flowing. Combined with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) induced by the lack of sunlight, working from home, COVID-19 restrictions, and other factors, it's not unusual for employees to experience rising stress levels and increased pressure on their mental health.

The current conditions leave the conscientious employer in a position to consider what they can do to keep their employees' spirits up during the winter months, so here are some suggestions that could be implemented.

Exercise, fitness, goals

Cold weather naturally restricts most of our outdoor movements, which compromises the flow of natural mood boosters and endorphins our bodies release from physical activity. The lack of movement can potentially lead to lowered mood, depression, and decreased productivity. To remedy the situation, employers can organize physical team activities, helping reduce barriers to attendance where needed and celebrating employees who make an effort to attend regularly. Activities can range from group stretching sessions, yoga, light aerobics, skate nights, outdoor team sports, or even hiking excursions and bird watching clubs. On a day-to-day work level, managers can organize outdoor walking meetings, even in the cold, to do the double duty of exercise and time spent in the sun, soaking up vitamin D.

By leveraging the popularity of activity trackers like Fitbits or Apple watches, or even functionalities of smartphones, it's more than possible to implement team fitness goals. Employees can log their activity in a leaderboard spreadsheet, or challenge other team members to beat their results.

[According to one study of mobile exercise apps](#), nearly three-quarters of the 726 participants reported being more active and engaged than prior to using the app. The conclusion implies that exercise app users are more likely to exercise during their free time, which increases personal health outcomes. [Other studies have shown](#) that the social connection experienced using fitness apps is another factor in boosting their appeal.

Light therapy

As fall inevitably fades into winter, the lack of sunlight can have a significant effect on the circadian rhythm of some workers, triggering a form of depression known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). People experiencing SAD are more prone to mood swings and higher levels of anxiety and depression combined with low energy, sleepiness, and urges for higher calorie meals. SAD can be a very real cause for absenteeism and decreased productivity, but luckily, there are several ways to remedy it.

One of the most popular ways to combat bouts of SAD is with a [light-therapy lamp](#). SAD lamps are used in the morning to simulate sunlight, which helps trigger the brain to release serotonin, the "feel good" hormone. [Studies show](#) that using light therapy during periods when daylight hours are short can help adjust circadian rhythms, the body's process for regulating the sleep-wake cycle, beneficial for improving mood and reducing symptoms of depression.

Another option could be a sunrise light alarm clock that brightens as the sun rises or based on the time set for the alarm. The use of timed light in this fashion [has been shown](#) to be an effective, noninvasive tool for improving the quality of sleep, mood, and well-being. Data suggests that appropriately timed exposure to light can reset the sleep-wake cycle, helping people get up at a chosen time. Light therapy has also been shown to improve alertness and reduce grogginess during the day.

Make sure to send email communications to your workers with suggestions on how to combat SAD or look into creating a wellness fund for purchasing extra lighting, especially if employees are working from home.

Socializing and communication

Isolation due to quarantining, health restrictions, or working remotely can lead to significant mental strain and loneliness in the winter months. Managers should check in with their teams on a human level at least once a week, rather than on a transactional "I need you to do this task" basis.

To boost team spirit, it's important to organize regular team check-ins via web cameras or in-person that are purely social in nature. There are a number of group [online games](#) or [informal ice breakers](#) that can be played for colleagues to get to know each other better. If you can't go to the water cooler, then bring the water cooler to you! Other ideas could be to start online discussion groups like a book club or crafting from home projects.

Community support

The winter months are typically a time when folks think about how they can help those in need in their communities. Helping others is also a time-honoured way of boosting your own sense of well-being. Employers can connect employees with volunteer opportunities, set up Dollars for Doers programs, champion charitable events or campaigns, or just recognize folks who are engaged in their community in a meaningful way.

Compassion and mental health awareness

The manner in which employers communicate to their staff is as important as what is being communicated. Using compassion motivates people to put forth a selfless effort in helping the physical, mental, or emotional pains of another and themselves. Given the hardships experienced in winter months, it's important to maintain a level of compassion for employees to maintain team morale and ultimately, productivity.

Remind workers of company wellness policies and time off. While pandemic-imposed travel restrictions can make vacations challenging, breaks from work or "staycations" should always be encouraged. Employers can also consider whether their policies allow for folks to take time off for mental health needs as well as physical health needs. If their policies do allow for it, do their managers and culture encourage employees to make use of this? Mental health days that can be taken without fear of stigma are critical.

Workplaces that demonstrate care for their employees report that they are better equipped to provide a supportive working environment. Organizations can also consider an online counselling service like [Mind by Maple](#). This whole-person care service offers online talk therapy from licensed Canadian therapists, personalized treatment, and online resources that make it easy for employees to receive support from the comfort of their homes to exercise self-care.

Mind by Maple also includes access to [Headspace](#), an easy-to-use science-based solution that makes meditation and mindfulness simple. Through over 1000+ hours of guided meditations, exercises, and more, Headspace helps employees improve their mental well-being, stress less, build more resilience, and sleep more soundly, especially needed in winter months.

Promoting and creating a culture of mindfulness with meditation stress breaks can help take the edge off the winter blues.

Flexibility

Hectic work schedules, especially when there are fewer hours of daylight and the weather is colder, can lead to stress and burnout. Being a flexible employer by accommodating employees with a schedule to fit their needs during the season is often seen as a gesture of good will and respite. What's key is that workers are able to balance energy for optimal psychological and physical functioning in their professional and personal lives.

Winter can be tough on employee mental health, especially when navigating a global pandemic, but certain efforts won't go unnoticed. Organizations should strive to prioritize communication, compassion, goodwill, and teamwork to boost morale, fend off depression induced by Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) and maintain optimal productivity.

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