



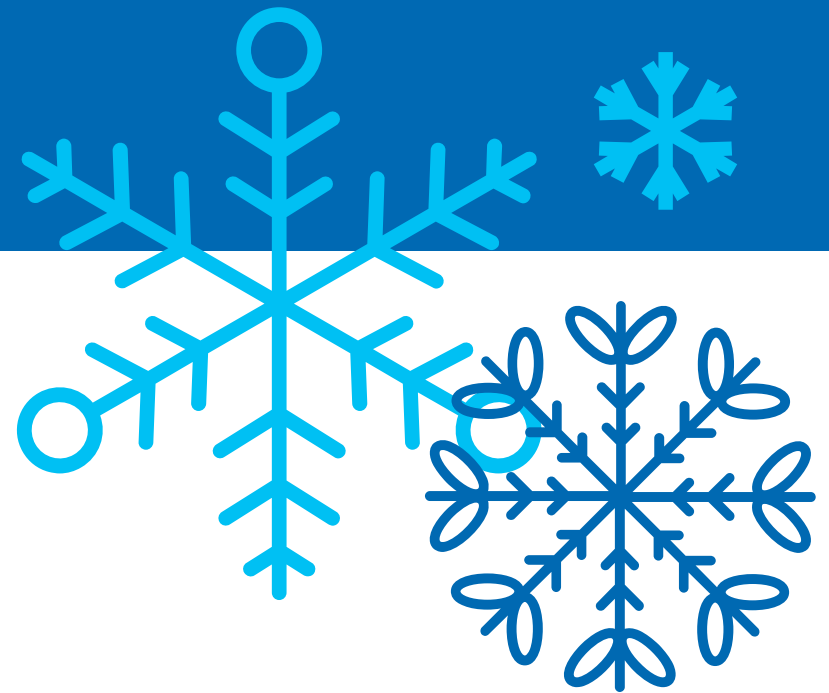
Mental Health
Commission
of Canada

Commission de
la santé mentale
du Canada

Workplace
Mental Health



Mini-guide to help employees' mental health through winter



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Introduction

With the challenges brought on by cold weather and the holiday season, winter can often be a difficult time. But with COVID-19, this year's winter may be even more demanding on our mental health and well-being. This mini-guide is designed to help employers provide workers with specific tools and resources during the winter months.

These resources may also be helpful for friends, family, and community members.





Why is our mental health affected more during winter and the holiday season?

As summer comes to an end, we quickly find ourselves in the midst of darker, colder months. While some people embrace the wintry weather, others struggle with their daily tasks or fall into seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a type of depression related to these seasonal changes. Not everyone experiences SAD, but lots of people share very similar symptoms and mood changes during winter.



Reasons people experience mood changes and options on what they might do to cope



Lack of sunlight

Evidence shows that a lack of sunlight can cause a vitamin D deficiency in some people. Vitamin D deficiencies have been linked to feelings of sadness and depression.

Coping strategy

- Using light-therapy lamps (under a doctor's recommendation) can help increase daily light saturation. (Prescriptions can sometimes help insurance companies cover the cost.)
- Vitamin D supplements can also be helpful (but should be discussed with a doctor)



Decreased exercise

More time indoors due to weather and COVID-19 restrictions can decrease regular exercise.

Coping strategy

- Exercise indoors and increase movement. If possible, include indoor equipment.
- Schedule regular movement breaks to get more active.
- Include some outdoor activities, but be sure to dress appropriately for the weather.



Financial concerns

Holiday expenses are overwhelming for many people. The constant stress and worry over finances can have a significant toll.

Coping strategy

- Create a budget and stick to it to avoid unwanted debt.
- Use your employee assistance program (EAP) or community resources to consult with a financial planner in creating a plan that works for you.
- Get creative when planning for lower cost decor, gifts, or food.



Family obligations

Spending time with each person, arranging schedules, and trying to make everyone happy can be overwhelming.

Coping strategy

- Set healthy boundaries: try to set priorities and schedules and keep to those as much as possible. It's OK to say "no" if you can't meet certain obligations.
- Avoid misunderstandings by being clear and communicating frequently. Let everyone know what to expect and when to expect it



Eating habits

Cool weather usually means more comfort food. Treats, baking, and sweet dishes are more available, especially in the office. While it may be enjoyable, some people find that it can lead to lower energy and be harmful to their physical and mental health.

Coping strategy

- Consult a nutritionist (through your EAP or benefits plan).
- Try to plan your meals to find a balance of healthy eating.
- Eat foods with more nutritional value and try to limit less healthy foods.



Isolation

Isolation can lead to significant strain. Changes to circumstances, traditions, and normal activities may occur due to health restrictions, which can result in feelings of loneliness.

Coping strategy

- Try to maintain as many safe social interactions as possible through virtual meetings and online activities.
- Connect with your work colleagues or family through fun games and activities (virtually or with appropriate physical distancing).
- Sometimes, just having a good chat on the phone can make a big difference.



Alcohol and substance use

The consumption of alcohol and other substances tends to rise due during the holidays, which can inhibit good decisions, raise the risk of incidents, and increase the impact of mental health problems.

Coping strategy

- Try to reduce consumption. If you find yourself getting concerned about your level of consumption, reach out for help through your benefits plan, EAP, or other supports from your human resources (HR) department or from the community.



Work schedules

Hectic work schedules, especially when there are fewer hours of daylight and the weather is colder, can lead to stress and burnout. Some people find themselves working on tighter deadlines or taking fewer breaks during work hours. Customer service industries become significantly busier, which means longer hours for employees.

Coping strategy

- Even in the busy times, take time to find balance and flexibility within their working hours.
- Greater work-life balance can help increase productivity during high-stress periods.
- Workplaces should encourage employees to take the time they need and use their time off for wellness.

Additional challenges of a pandemic during the winter months



Sadness

Changes to activities and routines can lead to stress and sadness, including those due to health restrictions and public health measures. Sadness and feelings of loss from such changes are challenges that many people experience, especially during the holiday season.



Nostalgia about life before COVID-19

We tend to remember meaningful moments during times of reflection – and even more so during the holiday season. For some people, these memories lead to sadness and feelings of loss, this year especially.



Uncertainty

Not knowing what may happen or when or how something may happen causes high levels of anxiety and stress. Since these responses can filter into our everyday decisions and routines, some individuals may need professional supports to help them cope with feelings of uncertainty.



Fear of loss

Worries over losing what you know, and even worse, the people you love, can be difficult to cope with. Constant worrying about such losses can cause stress and affect people's productivity and well-being.



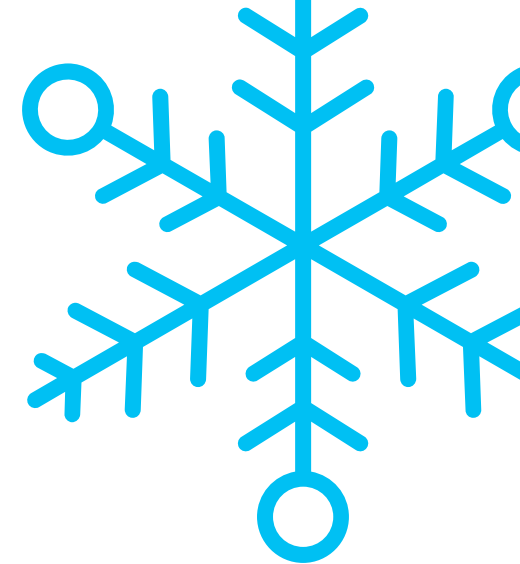
Fear of being ill

Because COVID-19 is a novel virus, unknown factors (including its portrayal in the media) can make it difficult to navigate new information. In such a climate, some individuals may be fearful that their loved ones or they themselves will become ill. These feelings can lead people to withdraw or become anxious, which can in turn cause high levels of stress.



Fear of medical facilities

Some people may be nervous about entering medical facilities. The stress of being alone during a consultation or treatment or the fear of contracting COVID-19 may make them reluctant to access medical care that could increase the risk of complications.



How can employers help their employees?

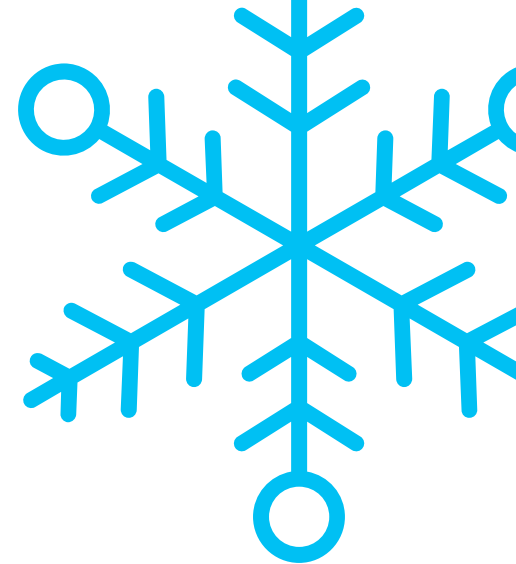
Communicating with empathy

How you communicate is as important as what you communicate. Communicating with empathy – the ability to recognize, understand, and share the thoughts and feelings of another person – requires listening with an intent to understand. Doing so enables you to make an informed and considerate response, which increases the likelihood of a positive outcome.

When individuals are having difficulty coping with stressors, communicating with empathy is one of the best ways of understanding and helping them get through such periods. Communicating clearly is also helpful during times of ambiguity. When people are feeling overwhelmed, they can find it difficult to process tasks and large amounts of information. Knowing that can help eliminate uncertainty in the workplace.

What to communicate

- information on resources for seasonal depression, anxiety, and coping skills
- the organization's policies on the importance of wellness, time off, and mental health
- EAP programs and the details they contain on counselling and other resources
- information on training or webinars employees can access
- personal stories that may help bridge emotions within the organization
- information on social initiatives or volunteer activities that employees can engage in during the holidays



Working from home

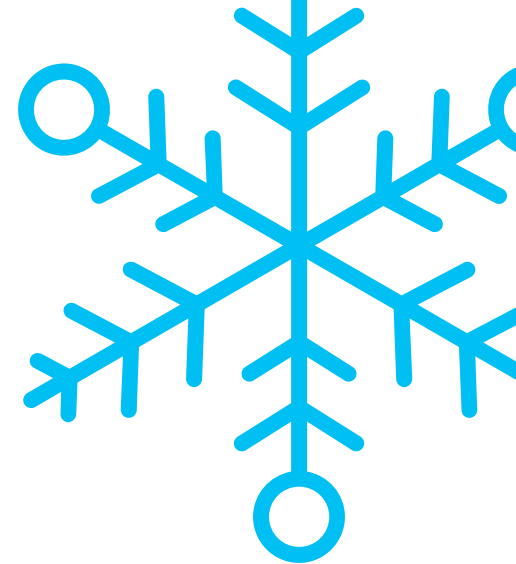
Safety considerations for workers in temporary or permanent work-at-home situations

Due to the pandemic, working from home has become a temporary norm in many organizations. For some companies, it has become the new mode of operations. Whether employees like to work from home or find it challenging and stressful, having less than ideal ergonomic setups can increase strain on the body, which can lead to pain and difficulties with focusing.

Providing suitable equipment and materials to support each worker's productivity (e.g., letting them take their workstation equipment home) is therefore recommended. Since additional equipment in the home can encroach on a worker's living space, it is also important to give them information on ergonomics and how to reduce their risk of injury. See the [Temporary Work at Home Ergonomics Guideline](#) for further details.

In addition, it may be helpful to let workers know about the benefits of physical fitness and the relationship between physical and mental health, while giving them access to supports to help maintain them, such as

- a wellness spending account
- virtual stretching, exercise, and meal preparation classes
- regular breaks and separating work and living spaces (as much as possible)
- healthy foods
- health specialists.



Stress and productivity

The human stress response is meant to keep us safe from threats or danger. Stress hormones are released that give us the burst of energy we need to fight, flee, or hide. Normally, when a threat or danger has passed, our body can rid itself of these hormones and heal through rest.

During a pandemic, we are no longer dealing with the normal stresses of life (especially in winter). When such sudden change and uncertainty are forced upon us, it is common to experience increased stress, fear, and anxious thoughts. These are normal reactions to abnormal situations.

While many people can operate under high stress for some time, they are not likely to be operating at peak performance. Since stress is a physiological response and is cumulative, our body does not distinguish its source (whether related to work, home, or an emergency). It's all just stress.

No matter where stress comes from, it can affect how well people function in various aspects of their lives, including work. Stigma tends to hold many individuals back from reaching out for help till they are so ill they have difficulty functioning, especially when they're in roles where mental toughness is expected or they feel that others depend on them.

Providing psychological and social supports can help workers overcome stigma and cope with the stresses of life during a difficult time.

These supports may look slightly different for people with lived experience of mental illness (e.g., more one-on-one interactions, accommodations).

Workers may need psychological and social support through various stages of a pandemic to help them cope. Even people with strong resiliency can be worn down by the chronic stress of living and working through such conditions.

Types of psychological and social support

- person to person (e.g., a worker talking to their supervisor, a health and safety committee member, a peer supporter, or someone with a [Mental Health First Aid](#) [MHFA] certificate)
- group based (e.g., a peer support group)
- universal (e.g., flexibility in the work schedule to help balance personal obligations and needs)
- informative (e.g., information about available supports to help workers manage anxiety)
- educational (e.g., webinars and courses about the effects of stress or coping with the psychological effects of isolation, financial worries, social stigma, anxiety about infection)
- skills based (e.g., training on new procedures, civility and respect in the workplace, new skills)
- benefits based (e.g., access to counselling and psychiatric services, paramedical services)*
- program based (e.g., accommodation, access to financial support, EAPs, community-based mental health programs)

Tip: Take an inventory of the available psychological and support programs and talk with workers about any challenges they might be experiencing, the types of support they need, and what they can access through the organization and in the community. Some programs may need to be tweaked to meet workers' needs during a pandemic.

Most of the improvements needed are in the realm of psychological and social support:

- reducing stigma about mental illness
- improving knowledge of signs, symptoms, and interventions
- providing guidance on where to go for support
- improving access to mental health support
- providing an environment with supportive relationships and proactive managers who utilize good interpersonal skills

The [Wellness Together Canada portal](#) also provides a number of mental health and substance use supports to people across Canada and Canadians living abroad (in both official languages) at no cost.



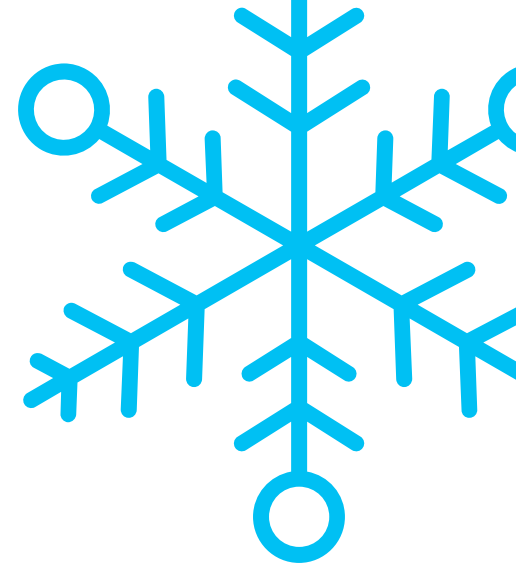
Balance and flexibility

While it's possibly one of the most commonly used phrases, being a flexible employer will go a long way during difficult times. Understanding that employees may occasionally need an afternoon off or need the freedom to choose their working hours can help them find greater balance. Focus more on productivity, than on time.

The key is that workers need to balance their energy for optimal psychological and physical functioning in their professional and personal lives.



- ✓ Define flexible work, limits on connectivity, and work hours.
- ✓ Encourage workers to take breaks and time off for well-being.
- ✓ Empower workers to adjust and take time for themselves.
- ✓ Understand the psychological demands of the work.
- ✓ Define essential work and what can be deferred.
- ✓ Redistribute tasks to help balance workloads.
- ✓ Focus on effort and results, not time spent.
- ✓ Encourage teams to establish and respect boundaries.
- ✓ Provide education, training, and tools (e.g., refreshers on stigma reduction, indicators of mental illness, coping strategies, MHFA).
- ✓ Rotate shifts and stagger time-off requests and vacations.
- ✓ Encourage the use of available benefits to support well-being.
- ✓ Foster the use of EAP and community and virtual resources to address health and well-being.
- ✓ Establish a safe space for dialogues about challenges and needs.
- ✓ Connect workers with mental health supports for themselves and their families.
- ✓ Help workers get the rest they need by providing tools and resources (instead of expecting them to self-manage) and upholding clear expectations around rejuvenation (often a problem owing to a lack of clarity and stigma).
- ✓ Offer accommodation, if needed.
- ✓ Utilize cross-functions to minimize duplication or extra effort.
- ✓ Mentor to prepare workers for the future.



Establish daily check-ins

Isolation and loneliness are widely felt during the holiday season and winter months. People who were active tend to hibernate more, and social contact often becomes less frequent. During a pandemic, these tendencies are made worse by health guidelines and greater limits on interactions with family and friends.

Being aware of isolation and loneliness among your employees is important. When everyone is in the workplace, we can look out for it in our daily interactions. But when we are working in a virtual world, a more proactive approach is needed.

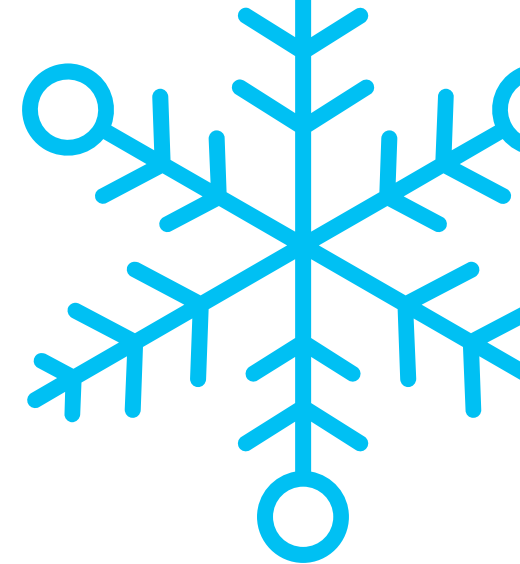
One such approach is to establish a daily check-in. This could take the form of one-on-one calls if employees work more independently, or team calls if their work is more collaborative. Depending on schedules, both types of calls can be used. Most important is ensuring that check-ins are regular and predictable, and that they let employees know they can consult with you and have their concerns and questions heard.

Encouraging social and volunteer activities

Establishing some community work within your organization can go a long way. Seek out community and social events that everyone can engage in and encourage them to get involved on their own. Such activities can offer support and companionship. Helping others also provides a sense of belonging.

Suicide prevention in the workplace

As we enter the winter season in the middle of a pandemic, employers and workers are facing an increased risk of suicidal ideation. To learn about the early actions employers can take to help prevent suicide, see the resources, training and tips in from the [Mental Health Commission of Canada](#).



Show kindness to your employees

What are small gestures to you may be big gestures to others. Many times, expenses that organizations can write-off or which come at a minimal cost can go a long way toward maintaining employee morale. For families struggling to make ends meet, people experiencing loneliness during the holidays, or employees feeling isolated, gestures showing that their organization personally cares about them can have significant benefits.

Consider giving unexpected tokens of appreciation such as a cupcake delivery (or healthy alternative), work-related comforts (think warm branded blankets), or even gift cards. Encourage them to indulge themselves in healthy ways at times when comfort is most needed. Some other ideas: an extra “free” day off, pizza (delivered to their home or the office), healthy snacks, gifts of wellness, and extra flexibility for wellness accounts.

Coping strategies and plans

Research has shown that establishing a coping plan and coping strategies for the stresses brought on by winter and the pandemic can help minimize their effects and create a safer environment.

Doing so will help organizations and workers increase productivity and reduce conflict, absenteeism, presenteeism, turnover, and claims. Employee well-being, interpersonal relationships, and overall health will be positively impacted by having meaningful plans in place.

Organizations can support these plans through communications strategies, HR and occupational health and safety committees, and specific programs.

Coping strategies and plans

Build your support system

A support system in and out the workplace is important. It doesn't need to be large, but having some trusted people and resources that workers can turn to when they need support can help them feel more connected and included. Identify what supports are available for workers and communicate this information often.

Try to envision what the winter ahead might look like and decide who they want to participate in activities with (even if it's virtual). Some fun activities may be virtual online games, an organized get together or a virtual movie night. It's also helpful to establish who might be used as a therapist or be part of a professional support system should workers find that they need extra help.

Suggest that workers write their plan down and talk with those in their support system, so they know how important they are. Employers too can organize some supportive activities, and add some fun. Laughing together helps people to unwind, relieve stress, and foster stronger bonds.





Practice relaxation regularly

Encourage workers to create a routine that includes daily relaxation (even if only for a few minutes) to reduce stress. For some, simple activities like watching a television show may help. For others it could be reading a book or dedicating time to spend with family. Letting such small moments become part of daily life can be an effective way to decrease stress levels.

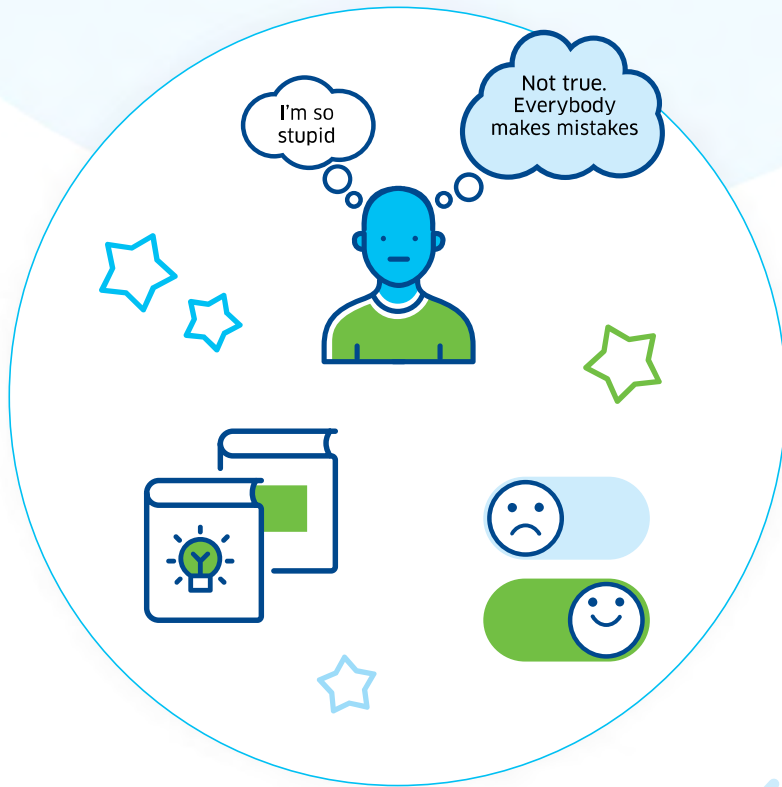
Create new routines

As winter approaches, encourage workers to create new routines to replace those that have become ingrained over the summer. Proactively creating new routines, which could include regular workouts, a nutritious diet, sound sleep, and mindfulness exercises, can help minimize the anxious moods that may arise with the seasonal transition. Doing so early on will increase the chances of a successful outcome.



Watch your self- talk

It is easier to get into bad mental habits during short winter days and long winter nights. Try to be mindful of the things you are saying to yourself, and try to challenge negative thinking if it starts to develop. There are strategies to correct negative thinking, which can be found in self-help books and in cognitive- behavioural therapy, if needed.



Create a coping plan

Coping plans can help workers visualize what they should do when feeling overwhelmed. When consumed by those feelings, it can be difficult for people to navigate which supports they need. Having a written plan can help workers access such information more efficiently.





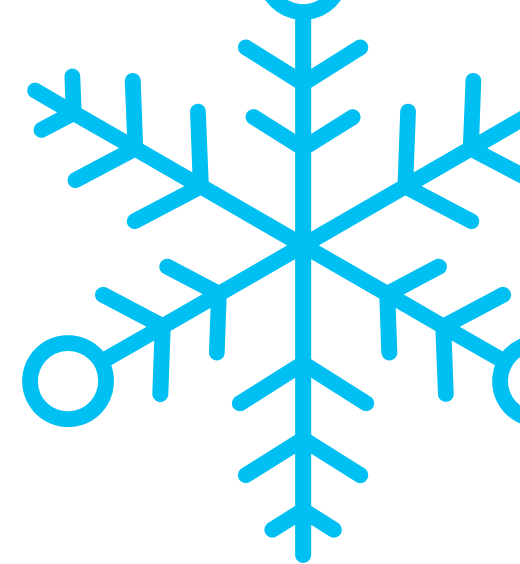
Set new goals to work toward

Encourage workers to set goals for themselves, such as things that they may have wanted to do but never had the opportunity to accomplish. Suggest that they find new areas to learn about, ideas to research, and hobbies or fitness goals to help keep them active. For example, they might finish a book they wanted to read or complete a webinar that helps them become more productive. New goals can help to redirect workers and give them something to focus on.

Seek professional help

Never underestimate the help and support professionals can offer. Your benefits plans, EAPs, and HR departments can help workers find solutions that suit your organization. Professionals can help workers set coping plans and strategies, deal with a crisis, and put things into perspective, or they can simply support workers in whatever way they need. Having a welcoming ear to listen can go a long way during the winter months.





Summary

With careful planning, action and proactive measures, we can all get through the winter months together. Remember to be consistent with new routines, embrace the change and indulge in the little joys along the way. Don't forget that we are always here to help at the Mental Health Commission of Canada.

Resources

- [Wellness Together Canada portal](#)
- [Mental Health Commission of Canada: The Working Mind – Workplace Resources](#)
- [Canadian Mental Health Association](#)
- [Suicide Response: Responding to Suicides in the Workplace](#)
- [Beating Winter's Woes](#)



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