How to Keep Your Team Happy During the Winter

The winter season is upon us. In many places in the country, there are icy rains, snow, icy roads, layering clothes, and the low winter light that drives many crazy. Something that comes with the winter season is shorter days that get dark sooner. The shorter days are a big factor in causing what is known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) or seasonal depression.

As is to be expected, this disorder can affect one's mood and, thus, productivity. It's important to understand that someone struggling with SAD can't help it. They don't want to be sad, especially around the office.

Luckily, there are some things you can do to help ease someone affected by SAD. As a team leader or manager, taking care of your employees is essential. It is certainly not your responsibility – but part of those little helps you can do include making necessary changes to help improve your employees' experience at work. If going to work drags a person down, they're probably not going to be productive. In other words, it's a lose-lose situation. You also don't want one individual "infecting" the whole group with sadness. Just as someone who is negative – any attitude in the office catches on with everyone on your team – so you will want to take some tips to help keep the workspace inviting for everyone during the winter months.

1. Understand Where They're Coming

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Unless you or someone you're close to has experienced SAD, it can be hard to empathize. Winter is most commonly associated with shorter days and lower light. While there's no excuse for not working, remember that those with SAD have to work extra hard to perform well. Normal things might become difficult to manage or process. An individual might feel out of it or tired all the time. Remember the symptoms of this disorder and try to be compassionate. Always try to support them and their strength to get through this. The more you make an effort to understand and support your employees, the better relationships you'll have.

2. Consider Making Environmental Changes

Sometimes the workplace isn't the most welcome environment. If the space isn't quite homey or cozy, it might feel a little gloomy. This can also exacerbate SAD because it's greatly affected by one's surroundings. Remember, the darker and shorter days are part of the cause. Changing the ambiance of your workspace can be the key to better productivity and boosting morale.

One aspect you can take into consideration is the lighting. The National Alliance on Mental Health Illness has said that bright, white fluorescent lights have been shown to reverse the winter depressive symptoms of SAD. Of course, natural light tends to be the best lighting, and there's that vitamin D, too, that comes from natural light and is so essential to our mental and physical health.

Another way to shift the ambiance is by playing some soft music over some speakers. This could be instrumental music, like mellow jazz, that creates a chill atmosphere. Some

employees who like it really quiet in the office can stick on their headphones for their concentrated work.

3. Provide Treats and Snack Foods

They say that one of the easiest ways to someone's heart is through their stomach. All jokes aside, food is one of those things that brings people together. And most people enjoy tasty treats. Stop and pick up a nice baked good or something sweet. Occasionally order some food for your office. Whether you make a treat or order it, or pick it up – a treat or a delicious meal will definitely be appreciated by the entire office.

Consider supplying a variety of snack-like food in the workplace for everyone to enjoy. It doesn't have to be a meal to be appreciated. Some great winter snack foods are popcorn and raw nuts like almonds or walnuts – health muffins, protein bars, hot chocolate, coffee, healthy juices, or pretzels – something that chases away the blues. If someone has dietary restrictions – they are all adults and can take care of themselves. You are merely trying to make your office and office culture more inviting. When you bring in something for the whole office, others will follow your lead and take their turn bringing something in for everyone.

4. Organize Activities in the Office

Another way to create an inviting atmosphere is by having team activities. You can do some of these activities in the workplace and make them during or after work hours. Maybe host a potluck for lunch. Or, throw an ugly sweater contest. In our office, we have contests with darts, mini-basketball, and then stand on the Fluidstance Balance Board (while doing darts or basketball). We have also learned to play Pickleball this

year, as an office, and meet at the park when it’s warm or at a Pickleball Club.

You can also have little parties in the office. As mentioned above, you can have these small parties either during work hours, during lunch, or after work. These get-togethers can also be themed if you want. Think of something that would de-stress everyone, like a charcuterie board party or wine tasting (after hours). These little get-togethers can help boost morale and generate an easy way for everyone to unwind.

5. Plan Activities Outside of the Office

Additionally, don’t be afraid to throw some get-togethers outside of the office. Be more open to inviting people from the office to do things together – going out to dinner (everyone paying for their own food if you wish), going to a movie, or bowling. How about a team game night? We have done all of these things, and it’s been fun. These get-togethers seem to help boost the spirits of the whole team and show that you all care about each other beyond the workplace and can have a good time in a separate space from work.

6. Don’t Be Stingy with PTO

Some mental health days may be needed during the winter. You’ll need to approach this possibility with an understanding and compassionate viewpoint. Remember that communication is important to show that you care and understand what people are going through. Let your employees know that it’s okay to ask for a day or two if they need it. They’ll feel safer and more comfortable knowing that they’re appreciated enough to be able to take those breaks.

7. Listen to Everyone’s Ideas

Consider taking requests from your employees about having some winter fun. It can be difficult to come up with all the ideas by yourself, especially when you have a company or team to manage. Giving your employees or team a moment to brainstorm can help get their minds off stressful things and think about winter activities instead. Or, listen to their suggestions for ways to change the ambiance to be more soothing. We have gone sledding as a group, some have gone skiing together, and there are many other winter activities that have helped out the whole team.

Any activities that we have made a concentrated effort to bring to the office crowd have resulted in higher productivity as a group – whether or not everyone participated at the time. And the memories have helped to bind us together.

Have a place for employees to write down their ideas in a community space. Maybe even consider using a work-wide calendar to jot down the days of potential activities. This calendar could be posted in the break room or even be virtual. Or, consider hanging a suggestion box or holding team meetings to talk about possible changes. Just make sure everyone who wants to say something can have their voice heard.

Give Everyone Some Grace

The wintertime can bring feelings of both joy and sadness to people. Just because someone has a family doesn’t mean they have happy times all the time. Everyone is super busy with their stuff – work, activities, kids, partners, spouses – but regardless – everyone can use an extra friend, and work friends are often the best ever.

Having high-strung employees is something you want to avoid, so be kind and considerate and give your employees and

teammates a break if they need it. Set a culture in your office where everyone offers words of encouragement and support to each other. And, most importantly, keep the spirits lifted in your office this winter with winter cheer – your productivity meter will thank you.

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