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Take the chill off winter blues

This time of year can take a toll on workplace morale. There are ways to lift the gloom, writes JEFF BUCKSTEIN

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Lynn Minuk says she's usually highly motivated, with lots of energy to burn.

But she admits some cold, dark winter mornings leave her feeling so deflated that she doesn't want to leave her Calgary home.

"I just don't feel like getting up and going to work when it's minus 45 degrees with the wind chill, my car won't start, and there are snow banks and icy conditions.

"I feel like curling up in bed and saying, 'Okay, let me know when the robins start singing', " laughs the executive director of a women's shelter in Calgary who also runs an Alberta program to help disadvantaged women become entrepreneurs and has her own life-coaching practice.

Ms. Minuk is not alone. Across the country, employees are feeling the effects of the winter blues, which can take a serious toll on the workplace, zapping energy, depleting morale, increasing absenteeism and decreasing productivity.

How bad does it get? Chicago-based ComPsych Corp. found that 46 per cent of more than 1,000 respondents to a poll it conducted among its 2,000 client companies in the United States reported feeling less productive during the winter months.

One-third of respondents to the 2003 survey also reported feeling decreased energy levels as a result of receiving less daylight.

In fact, ComPsych, which provides employee assistance programs, typically fields a 20- to 25-per-cent increase in EAP-related requests after the holidays, with the number peaking between the end of January and early February, and only returning to normal levels by early March, says David Campbell, the company's vice-president of quality management.

"Most of the calls we get are related to what we call the winter blues," he says. "Folks are feeling kind of lethargic [and showing] a lack of interest in things."

The winter blues also contribute to what experts call presenteeism -- used to describe people who physically show up to work but don't really produce, Mr. Campbell adds.

Warren Shepell Consultants Corp. in Toronto, another EAP provider, also finds a 10- to 15-per-cent above-average spike in calls from its clients for about the first six weeks of the year.

"People complain about being unfocused and unable to do the things they feel they should be able to [do] on a daily basis," president and chief executive officer Rod Phillips says. "There's an overall sense of increased pressure at work and at home, and that causes anxiety because they're just not coping."

For some employees, winter woes are even more serious: About 3 per cent of Canadians suffer from the more extreme seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a type of depression that strikes during the winter months as a result of short days and lack of sunshine, says Karen Liberman, Toronto-based executive director of the Mood Disorders Association of Ontario.

"It's the kind of illness that makes people very lethargic and provides for difficulty in concentration and focusing," Ms. Liberman says.

Perhaps the most destructive behaviour associated with SAD, adds Robert Levitan, a psychiatrist with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, is simple avoidance.

Some sufferers "tend to just stay at home in bed and avoid having to deal with day-to-day stress or interpersonal interactions," he says. SAD can also lead to overeating and increased alcohol and drug use, Dr. Levitan says.

So what can employers and their employees do to mitigate the effects of the winter blues?

Ms. Minuk sticks to a rigid exercise program before going to work and at lunch, when she and others in her office have organized an outdoor lunchtime running group.

"It's a way of saying, even though it's winter and the season's getting long and we're not feeling great about it, we're not going to let this get the better of us," she says.

The forced exercise not only makes Ms. Minuk feel good physically but also provides her with an energy boost and a sharper mind with which to meet her heavy workload.

Strategies like Ms. Minuk's are the way to go, experts say. Maintaining proper nutrition and exercise are extremely important to physical and emotional health.

Employees should also be especially diligent about maintaining their social networks, both at home and at work, says Ottawa psychologist Gilles Boulais.

"In Canada, we tend to hibernate during the winter. People don't see their friends as much. So they should be mindful of that and make sure they go out from time to time."

Other ways employees can try to pick up their own spirits is to try to find motivation in, for instance, establishing new goals and targets to shoot for, says Merge Gupta-Sunderji, a Toronto-based professional speaker and organizational learning consultant.

Midwinter may also be a good time to list your successes over the past year. "When you write down all the things you've accomplished, this fires up your motivational level even further," she says.

Corporations also need to understand that "lack of daylight is injurious to our health" so they should open up window blinds and let in as much light as possible, Ms. Liberman says.

Employers should also address so-called sick building syndrome by making sure their building's ventilation system works well and air quality is maintained, Dr. Boulais says. Otherwise, employees may find themselves suffering from headaches, feelings of drowsiness, lethargy, apathy and an inability to concentrate -- intensifying what those feeling the winter blues may already be experiencing.

Nora Spinks, president and founder of consulting firm Work-Life Harmony Enterprises in Toronto, says another strategy she has seen many employers use is to provide employees with fun, relaxing activities during the winter months to re-energize them, give them something positive to focus on and lift their spirits "at a time of year . . . when people feel fairly isolated."

Such activities include health and wellness events, in which they try to help employees keep New Year's resolutions, such as quitting smoking, losing weight or getting more physically fit.

Many companies put on lunchtime events, sometimes called "lunch and learns." Some employer-sponsored events put the emphasis on humour because, after all, "laughter is good medicine," Ms. Spinks says. "I think we're now seeing employers recognize the sort of seasonal rhythms people are experiencing," she says.

Jim Johnston, senior vice-president of corporate resources at the Great-West Life Assurance Co. in Winnipeg, says he's noticed over his 27 years with the insurer an annual surge in attendance during the winter months at company-sponsored noon-hour programs, such as its "Wellness Wednesday" health-related seminars.

While such programs are offered all year round, Mr. Johnston believes the surge comes because people are "looking for activities that will assist them in coping" with the stresses that winter brings.

Royal Bank of Canada offers its employees similar programs. Especially popular during the winter months are work-life workshops that incorporate coping with the winter blues, says Norma Tombari, senior manager in charge of diversity and work force solutions.

Another tactic Ms. Spinks suggests is for employers to schedule a social event for employees in January or February.

Edmonton-based Stantec Inc. actually forsakes a Christmas party to hold a "winter gala" in its Edmonton, Calgary and Albany, N.Y., offices, typically in late January.

This year, for example, the Edmonton event featured a Chicago thirties-style club theme that brought out most of its 800 employees in the city. It's "for the whole purpose of defeating the winter blues [and] is a big employee morale booster," company spokesman Jay Averill says.

The Certified General Accountants Association of Canada's government relations office in Ottawa will play host to a reception in early February, in part to provide its employees and members of Parliament -- who are usually feted with a flurry of activities around the Christmas and New Year holidays -- something to look forward to in the depths of winter. "We think it's a good time to get together with a toast," says Carole Presseault, vice-president of government and regulatory affairs at CGA-Canada. "February is a long month in Ottawa, one in which the weather does not always co-operate."

Ms. Gupta-Sunderji, a former accountant, says spontaneous, unexpected treats can also work wonders for winter-sapped morale.

When she was a financial manager at a major oil company in Calgary, she recalls treating her staff to a surprise afternoon off at the movies. The effect, Ms. Gupta-Sunderji recalls, "was huge. They talked about it for months."

Aside from any feel-good benefits, such tactics also pay large economic dividends, says Piers Steel, assistant professor of human resources and organizational dynamics in the Haskayne School of Business at the University of Calgary.

"Forget about being altruistic, which I think is a worthy goal in itself. Let's just get right down to how much it contributes to the bottom line. If you're an employer, it's hugely in your favour to help people through their depression [because] productivity gains far exceed the treatment costs," he says.

Beating the blues

Here are some expert tips on how to beat the winter blues:

For employers

Provide adequate lighting. To help combat gloom and more serious depression, especially seasonal affective disorder (SAD), open up blinds and otherwise allow in as much light as possible.

Avoid sick building syndrome. Poor air quality can contribute to drowsiness, lethargy, apathy and an inability to concentrate, which can intensify the winter blues. Ensure building ventilation systems work well and air quality is maintained to provide adequate ventilation and fresh air.

Offer company-sponsored events to re-energize employees and help them cope. Provide health and wellness events, workshops and other programs. Incorporate humour.

Arrange mid-winter social gatherings for employees. After the flurry of holiday activities winds

down, this gives employees something to look forward to and enjoy during the holiday-less months.

Offer spontaneous, unexpected treats, such as time off, or early Fridays, which are common in summer and can work wonders for spirits during the depths of winter.

Bring sunny days into the office. Having colourful summer flowers around can help perk up employees.

For employees

Pay attention to physical and emotional fitness. Make sure to get proper exercise and nutrition.

Arrange activities with fellow employees to keep up fitness, such as lunchtime running groups.

Maintain your social networks, both at work and at home, to avoid the effects of winter hibernation.

Be self-motivating. Write down lists of successes over the past year. Establish new goals and targets.



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