

December 2018

# viewpoint

The most joyful or perhaps the most stressful time of the year? For many it's the latter. We take a look at how employers can help...

The December holiday season is a time most of us associate with festive cheer, happiness and joy. But for lots of people, "the most wonderful time of the year" can be a time of stress, financial burden and loneliness. While you might regularly hear talk of the "January blues", a study by MetLife UK reveals that some 42% of employees believe that December is actually the most stressful month of the year<sup>1</sup>.

So, for nearly half of employees surveyed, why is December so stressful and how can employers help ease the burden on their staff over the festive period?

## The stresses of December

December can be a tough time for many, as financial, workplace and family stresses come to the fore. When you combine these life pressures with mental health issues associated with the changing seasons, such as seasonal affective disorder (SAD), December can be a time of year that has a negative impact on physical and mental wellbeing.

The link between employee wellbeing, poor productivity and increased absenteeism is undeniable. According to a study by Deloitte<sup>2</sup> on workplace mental health and wellbeing, "poor mental health impacts individuals' overall health, their ability to work productively (if at all), their relationships

with others, and societal costs related to unemployment, poor workplace productivity and health and social care."

In order to help you help ease the burdens of the festive season on your employees, we have looked at some of the most stressful moments of the holiday season and how you can help your team lower their stress and remain happy and healthy over the course of December.

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## Workplace stress

Gone is the myth that everything workwise slows down in December. Instead, there's seemingly not enough hours in a work day throughout the month, as short days for team lunches or school plays, holiday parties and increasing numbers of colleagues out of the office mean workloads can stack up. When you combine all of that with the looming year-end deadlines, workplace stresses can mount. The American Management Association<sup>3</sup> cites a study that found, of 600 full-time employees, 66% reported additional stress at work during the holiday season.



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The American Psychological Association estimates that 550 million work days are lost due to stress each year, equating to more than US\$500 billion siphoned off the US economy<sup>4</sup>. Given the correlation between work stress in December and the huge impacts this can have on employees' health and the resulting impacts on the workplace, it is in the best interests of employers to look to help manage staff stress levels in the festive period.

## Financial concerns

The stresses of the festive season don't necessarily ease up when you leave the office. The impact of overspending at Christmas can leave many people feeling worried about their financial health. In 2017, British people said they planned to spend nearly £400 (£390.56) on Christmas gifts alone<sup>5</sup>. When you add additional social events, extra food shopping, alcohol and other festive treats, the price of celebrating over the course of December can really add up.



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These additional costs are particularly worrying, given that 39% of employees said they were living from payday to payday, according to MetLife's 2017 Employee Benefits Trends Study<sup>6</sup>. The same study found that 34% of employees are distracted at work due to financial worries, making employees' financial wellbeing a real concern for employers.

## Seasonal depression

Moving into a new season can be a difficult time for many people. While this difficulty can occur from winter to summer, more often individuals struggle when moving into winter. With days getting shorter, natural light decreasing and the weather getting colder, many suffer from seasonal depression. UK mental health charity MIND<sup>7</sup>



says that “those who experience SAD could find a change in seasons, most commonly moving into winter, has a much greater effect on their mood and energy levels than it does for others”.

**“Those suffering with SAD may show a lack of concentration, increased tiredness and lack of energy, comfort eating and mood problems.”**

And this is by no means a niche problem. According to Mental Health America<sup>8</sup>, in any given year about 5% of the US population experience seasonal depression.

In the workplace, those suffering with SAD may show a lack of concentration, increased tiredness and lack of energy, comfort eating and mood problems. With winter coming into full force in the northern hemisphere in December, a seasonal depression can have adverse effects on employees at one of the most stressful times of the year.

As with any mental health condition, if left untreated, SAD can cause problems for the individual and in the workplace. It can lead to increased stress and tiredness which could result in aggravated behaviours, a greater number of workplace accidents and compensation claims as well as lost productivity which can cost the business money. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that depression and anxiety cost the global economy US\$1 trillion per year in lost productivity<sup>9</sup>.

## Lonely this Christmas?

Although many associate loneliness as predominantly a problem faced by the elderly, the UK based charity “Campaign to End Loneliness” cites a study from The Co-Op and the British Red Cross that found over nine million adults in the UK, of all ages, are either always or often lonely<sup>10</sup>.



For a variety of reasons, the festive period can be a particularly difficult time for those feeling lonely. The ‘family’ feel of the festive season and the general promotion of ‘togetherness’ can cause these feelings to become even more apparent over December

However, it is also important to remember that for those employees with children as well as aging relatives and extended family to think about, things can also get pretty stressful. The emotional and financial burden of ensuring everyone has a great time can rest heavily on their shoulders. And for many people, simply spending that much time with their spouses and/or families can be stressful.

## Making December less stressful

So, everything combined, it's not that surprising that many employees feel their stress levels climbing towards the end of the year... But don't despair, it isn't all doom and gloom. Here are some things employers can do to keep their teams happy and productive over the holiday season.

**Flexible working** – with a lack of time to meet work deadlines, buy gifts, run errands and see to family issues a concern for many over the festive season, employers could consider offering flexible working to help alleviate the stress. Whether by rearranging hours or offering working from home or agreeing for a while to allow deliveries at work, employers can look into how a change in the rules for a while might suit their organisation.

**Address financial wellbeing** – ensure your employees know that you can help them navigate the financial strains of the festive season either through running proactive money management advice sessions or by reminding them that your Employee Assistance Programme offers confidential support at any time.

If it's possible, consider paying end of year bonuses earlier or offering extra shifts over

the course of December to give staff the opportunity to earn extra money during this expensive time of year.

**Consider end of year deadlines** – while something may seem urgent in the run up to the end of year, consider the impact that this can have on the stress levels of those trying to hit this deadline when fewer colleagues and management may be around to help or agree.

As an employer, encourage your team managers to consider whether these hard deadlines are both feasible and necessary, given that December can be a shorter month with lower staffing levels. Pushing some deadlines back to January could be hugely beneficial for the wellbeing of your teams.

**Encouraging volunteering** – according to the Society for Human Resource Management<sup>11</sup> 13% of employers allow time for volunteering opportunities during work hours. Most people agree that helping others whose situation is worse than your own can be life affirming and can keep perceived problems in perspective. Whether during or outside of working hours, encouraging volunteering is a great way to improve mental wellbeing.

## The health benefits of volunteering<sup>12</sup>

- Helping others feels good
- It brings a sense of belonging and reduces isolation
- It helps to keep things in perspective
- It helps make the world a happier place – it's contagious
- The more you do for others, the more you do for yourself
- It reduces stress
- It helps get rid of negative feelings.



## Onwards and upwards

While this is by no means an exhaustive list, there are at least some ideas to help make December less emotionally, mentally, or financially taxing for your employees. They might also spark some ideas around solutions that work for your business. Employers have an important role to play in supporting both mental health and stress related issues, so any programmes and plans that keep employees happy and healthy over this potentially stressful time of year are worth considering.

And if they then start the new year happy, healthy, productive and fully present – you're onto a winner!

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2015/12/15/christmas-period-is-the-most-stressful-for-employees.html> (accessed 21/11/18)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/public-sector/deloitte-uk-workplace-mental-health-n-wellbeing.pdf> (accessed 21/11/18)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.amanet.org/training/articles/coping-with-holiday-stress-at-work.aspx> (accessed 21/11/18)

<sup>4</sup> American Psychological Association, 'Stress in America: Paying With Our Health', February 2015

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.finder.com/uk/christmas-spending-statistics> (accessed 21/11/18)

<sup>6</sup> MetLife, Employee Benefits Trends Study, 2017

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad/about-sad/#W-k\\_2p7SUL](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad/about-sad/#W-k_2p7SUL) (accessed 21/11/18)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/sad> (accessed 23/11/18)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/in\\_the\\_workplace/en/](http://www.who.int/mental_health/in_the_workplace/en/) (accessed 23/11/18)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/the-facts-on-loneliness/> (accessed 23/11/18)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/stress-less-for-the-holidays-1916836> (accessed 23/11/18)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/doing-good-does-you-good> (accessed 23/11/18)

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