



January 2017

viewpoint

The 'January blues': can you help your team help to beat them?

January means the start of a new year and often a feeling that we should do more and do it better – the pressure of a new year, new you! Many of us are also in a post-festive or summer holiday slump – overspent and under-exercised. In the Northern Hemisphere, we can add short days, long nights, cold weather and bad health to the mix, meaning that for a lot of people, January can be a challenging, even a depressing month.

Given the potential impact on productivity, should employers be doing what they can to help staff beat the January blues?

January can be a difficult month. A lot of factors can conspire to negatively impact a person's psychology and physiology, from bleak weather and long nights in the North, to loneliness over the festive period, a lack of money and sleep, the after effects of too much food and drink, and even the end of your summer holiday in Southern climes.

Coping or helping with the 'January blues' has become an increasingly important part of the employee health and wellbeing conversation. And if we've now managed to depress you too, I hope we can help...

The question is whether employers can and should try to help staff navigate their way through this potentially difficult period by advising on or encouraging things such as gym usage, healthy eating, getting enough sleep and managing money. And can employers help make the 'new year, new you' pressures into a shared and enjoyable experience?

As our recent white paper on optimism in the workplace found, there is a direct link between an employee's negative outlook and poor productivity.

While there's not much any of us can do to change the weather, could some small adjustments, specifically at this time of the year, to the support generally offered have a real impact on business performance? The first step is to understand the main drivers behind the 'January blues'.



Lack of sunlight

Formally recognised in the 1980s and classified as a variant of depression, seasonal affective disorder (SAD) has become much better understood over the past few decades. It is characterised by depressive episodes that recur annually, at the same time, usually during the winter months. Symptoms can include decreased energy, lethargy, increased appetite, disrupted sleeping patterns, weight gain and difficulty concentrating¹. The disorder is thought to be exacerbated by the end of the festive period and the start of the new year.

According to the American Academy of Family Physicians², 4 to 6% of Americans suffer from SAD, while another 10 to 20% may have a mild version of the condition.

A UK survey³ carried out in early 2017 found that:

44%

(over two-fifths) of employees say winter has a negative effect on their mental wellbeing.

50%

said they believe it adversely affects their mood.

30%

believed winter affects their productivity.



Lack of sleep

One of the big challenges at this time of year is that of too little sleep. Winter should be a time when we sleep for longer but, partying in the festive season, concerns about overstretched finances, difficult commutes in poor weather and even just the frantic pace of modern life means we tend to get far less than we need to stay healthy and productive.

Study after study tell us about the benefits of sleep – not just for one night here and there but regular, good quality sleep. In our Sleep whitepaper from 2016 we discuss how some 40% of the US workforce may be sleep deprived and a recent UK study⁴ found that more than one third of the UK population regularly gets less than six hours sleep a night. In fact, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in the US declared insufficient sleep a ‘public health problem’ in 2015⁵.

Such is the growing concern that employers are increasingly getting caught up in the discussion: are companies making people work too long and/ or loading employees with too much stress so that their sleep is adversely affected?

Researchers at US-based Rand, a research organisation that develops solutions to public policy challenges, analysed⁶ data from 62,000 people in five countries and found employees who sleep less than six hours a night lose around six more working days through absenteeism or presenteeism each year than those who sleep seven to nine hours a night. Rand also calculated that Japan had the greatest drop in productivity due to sleep deprivation, with an annual loss of \$138 billion (around 2.9% of its GDP).



Lack of funds

January can also be a month with very little money. Many of us overspend on our holidays or in the run up to the festive season and so being paid early for Christmas – done as a favour by many employers – might seem like a relief at the time but means it’s a week longer than usual until the next pay day.

According to research shared on finder.com⁷, Millennials – who will make up a good percentage of most workforces – are most likely to overspend during the festive season.

To cover their Christmas spending this year:

33%

plan to take out payday loans

55%

will rely on credit cards to cover their Christmas spending this year.

The research suggested that men are slightly more likely than women to take out a loan and use a credit card and are also twice as likely to ask a friend or family member for temporary help.

No matter who you borrow from, the point is, it’s all money that must be paid back, no doubt causing some worried, sleepless nights.

Challenging the impact of 'January blues'

So, given all of these things that can make January difficult, how can employers help their staff to get through this time, should they need it?

There is, as with most things, no clear set of instructions, and it is vital that employers are seen to offer objective and sympathetic help without appearing overbearing or dictatorial towards staff when it comes to their personal lives. Here are some suggestions that you could try.

Surely, some of these are worth a try. And, working to keep staff motivated throughout the post-holiday slump in January could well lead to better productivity, some good, healthy new habits and better teamwork throughout the rest of the year...

Provide education

- try to prepare in advance by educating staff about staying healthy and active during the festive season – specifically with regards to healthy eating and sensible drinking
- give out information about SAD and provide access to self-help groups. Try to make the work environment more appropriate – e.g., focus on making the workplace bright and well lit
- advise on the importance of getting a good night's sleep – and offering a means to discuss poor sleeping patterns if the primary cause is work-related/ stress
- propose some simple advice on how to economise
 - try not to impulse buy – wait a week and see if you really want the item that much
 - avoid the sales unless there's something you know you need
 - do a weekly food shop instead of eating out or buying food from convenient locations at greater cost
 - make the most of activities that are already paid for – the gym, your TV subscription, your travelcard to visit friends at home etc.

Make sure help is available

- ensure your staff know about your Employee Assistance Programme and how it can help
- develop mechanisms for people to come forward if they feel depressed or believe they are exhibiting symptoms associated with SAD such as disrupted sleeping patterns, weight gain and poor concentration.

Encourage an active and healthy lifestyle

- encourage annual leave during the winter to get some winter sun
- remind staff of the offer for discounted gym (or similar health/ wellbeing facility) membership and supporting this with regular updates, targets and even competitions
- support participation in work sponsored team sports and activities
- offer staff discounted wearable fitness technologies such as Fitbits to inspire them to take a healthier lifestyle approach
- encourage employees to switch off from work in the evenings by turning off mobile devices and not checking emails before going to sleep unless necessary
- encourage employees to eat foods rich in Vitamin D – this is produced by the body naturally in sunlight and can therefore be lacking in the darker winter months
- ensure that staff have access to fresh fruit by ordering in a weekly fruit basket
- offer some lunch and learn sessions where staff are given a free healthy lunch.

1 <https://patient.info/doctor/seasonal-affective-disorder-pro>
 2 <https://www.adp.com/thrive/articles/can-seasonal-affective-disorder-affect-your-business-3-812.aspx>
 3 www.bmmagazine.co.uk/news/44-workers-say-winter-negative-effect-mental-wellbeing
 4 <https://www.sleepcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/The-Great-British-Bedtime-Report.pdf>
 5 <https://www.cdc.gov/features/dssleep/index.html>
 6 www.rand.org/pubs/periodicals/health-quarterly/issues/v6/n4/11.html
 7 <https://www.finder.com/holiday-spending-statistics>

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