

Building a SAD-Savvy Workplace!

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A look at Seasonal Affective Disorder in the workplace: its causes, impacts, and SAD solutions for your employees and your business

In a few weeks, we'll be setting our clocks back an hour, plunging our days into darkness even earlier. In the months ahead, many employees will arrive and leave their workplaces in darkness, and rarely have a chance to see the light of day. Each and every one of us feels the absence of the sun, but for some of us, the shorter days and diminishing access to natural light bring on SAD. SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) is real. And over 1 million Canadians suffer from this serious depressive disorder, with many more experiencing this in a milder form. Let's look at what SAD is, how it can show up and impact the workplace, and what we can do about it.

In late autumn and early winter, our circadian rhythms — or internal clocks — are negatively impacted by the diminishing quality and quantity of sunlight. Not everyone becomes less alive, less active, and less willing to venture out of doors, but the vast majority of people living and working in Canada feel the shift and slow down a bit by the end of October. Most people experience an occasional bout of winter blues. Some people are more vulnerable, and find it hard to shake mild symptoms, like low moods, cravings for comfort foods, and lethargy. A small minority of sufferers experience more severe symptoms, including a deep, debilitating depression.

According to Toronto's CAMH (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health), a significant percentage of Canadians experience SAD in some form. Between 25 and 35 percent of people experience mild symptoms, described as the winter blues. Between 10 and 15 percent experience mild but persistent

symptoms, and 2 to 5 percent experience a severe clinical form of Seasonal Depression. SAD is also sharply divided along gender lines. A full 80 percent of SAD sufferers are women.

Recognizing the symptoms

Symptoms of SAD include feelings of depression, a lack of interest in things, low energy, and feeling sluggish. People suffering from SAD often have difficulty concentrating. They can be irritable, withdrawn, and hypersensitive to criticism. They often struggle with sleep issues and suffer from fatigue. Many SAD sufferers overeat and experience significant weight gain. Many withdraw socially. In extreme cases, people struggling with SAD suffer through clinical Seasonal Depression and may experience suicidal thoughts. These symptoms can persist for several months.

SAD in the workplace

In the workplace, Seasonal Affective Disorder shows up in many ways, including increased absenteeism, lower productivity, and diminished job interest, satisfaction, and engagement. This can translate into presenteeism (a lack of engagement and attention on the job), and difficulties in making decisions and completing tasks. Workplace injuries increase, and symptoms including lower mood, lethargy, and a tendency to withdraw and isolate can have a negative impact on employee morale.

Combatting SAD

There are several strategies for employers and managers to consider to effectively combat Seasonal Affective disorder in the workplace.

Equipping employers and managers to recognize serious symptoms

When it comes to the most severe cases of SAD, knowledge is key to recognizing and supporting employees. Employers and managers who are aware of Seasonal Affective Disorder signs and symptoms can effectively support employees struggling with SAD in all its forms. Employees with severe SAD can be encouraged to seek the help of medical and mental health professionals for treatment, which may include medications, psychotherapy, and light therapy.

Scheduling time outside

Especially for employees who arrive and leave the workplace in the dark, employers and managers can offer mid-day breaks, when the sun is at its height, and encourage employees to go out of doors and take in the sun. Creating an enjoyable cold-weather activity — even a brisk walk or an impromptu outdoor meeting — is a great way to increase exposure to natural light in the winter. When weather permits and the sun is shining, offering sunshine breaks to allow employees to enjoy a half-hour of sunlight can go a long way to help boost employee morale and help them feel more supported while benefitting from the sun's rays.

Consider flexibility in work schedules

If it is possible, allowing flexibility in work schedules could support employees struggling with SAD to build daily exposure to sunlight or light exposure or other therapy into their working day.

Letting the light in

Take a look at your work environment. Are there ways to make better use of available natural light? Could rearranging workspaces allow more access to light? Consider bringing in another form of light — artificial lighting and lightboxes that give off a light that mimics the sun's rays — a highly effective means of treating mild, moderate, and severe symptoms of SAD. Installing special lighting in common areas and making lightboxes

available for employees is a great way to help combat SAD.

Providing psycho-education, strategies, and healthy alternatives to help combat SAD

Consider Corporate Wellness events around Seasonal Affective Disorder. A Lunch & Learn is an effective way of building awareness around Seasonal Affective Disorder, and providing practical self-care strategies that help employees recognize the signs and symptoms, bring in quality self-care and make healthier choices.

For example, as diminished sunlight negatively impacts sleep, strategies around good sleep hygiene, including maintaining a regular sleep schedule, minimizing screen time before falling asleep, and creating an ideal sleep environment goes a long way to ensuring quality sleep and combatting fatigue. These and other self-care strategies can go a long way to improving the quality of life for many employees over the winter months. And offering healthy alternatives to carbohydrate-rich processed comfort foods can go a long way to helping employees combat winter weight gain.

Demonstrating to employees that they are valued and supported

It is important for those suffering from SAD to realize that they are not alone and that there are resources and strategies available should they need them.

Taking steps to mitigate the effects of SAD in the workplace shows a commitment to employee wellness and creating a workplace where both employees and an organization as a whole can thrive. As Seasonal Affective Disorder impacts employee morale, performance, safety, and quality of life, ensuring that employees have the support of their organization and the help they need, will help maintain a happy, healthy and workplace, even during the darkest days of winter.

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About the author

Dr. Monica Vermani is a Clinical Psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress and mood & anxiety disorders, and the founder of Start Living Corporate Wellness. She is a well-known speaker and author on mental health and wellness. Her upcoming book, A Deeper Wellness, is scheduled for publication in 2021. <https://www.drmonicavermani.com/>

Dr. Vermani has recently launched an exciting online self-help program, A Deeper Wellness, delivering powerful mental-health guidance, life skills, and knowledge that employees can access anywhere, anytime. <https://www.adeeperwellness.com/>

