Supporting Employees with Seasonal Affective Disorder Guide

RECOGNIZE THE SYMPTOMS
SAD is a type of clinical depression most common in winter months; this type of depression is not related to the cold weather, but is an effect of reduced exposure to sunlight, which decreases vitamin D intake and affects the body’s production of serotonin and melatonin, making us feel tired and depressed. Fewer daytime hours can make it seem like the day is over as soon as the workday is done, and remote work has made SAD even more challenging for some who struggle to separate their job and personal space.

Learn how to recognize the symptoms of SAD early:
• Decreased energy or difficulty getting out of bed;
• Uncontrollable emotions or frequent outbursts;
• Eating disorders or dramatic weight change; or
• Inability to focus or loss of interest in work.

Note that not all indications of SAD are visible. Mental Health Training for Leaders can help you effectively identify potential mental health issues, while sending out a Pulse Check: Remote Work Check-In Survey can gauge how employees you don’t see in person are feeling during their experience working remotely.

HELP THEM SEE THE LIGHT
Increasing exposure to natural light is beneficial for improving symptoms of SAD, but in many workplaces access to sufficient natural light is limited or not an option, and with remote work, employers have little to no control over work environments. This means many employees may be spending their day in poor lighting, and in winter months by the time they get off work it could already be dark out. In the workplace, you can increase exposure to light by switching to full spectrum bright lights in areas with poor lighting. Recommend employees work near a window, or reconfigure the workplace if possible so they are working in an area that has a lot of natural light. If these options are not possible, consider the use of light therapy lamps, which have been recognized for use of easing symptoms of SAD.

There is a direct correlation between physical and mental health. In addition to increasing exposure to natural light, physical activity can dramatically improve moods and overall health. Encourage employees to stay active, whether indoors or outdoors, by making sure they are taking advantage of all their breaks, stepping away from their work throughout the day, and getting some movement in. Even in cold weather, motivate them to go outside for a few minutes each day while it's still light out to get some fresh air and physical activity. If you offer additional wellness benefits, such as wellness spending accounts or fitness memberships, be sure to update your workplace Health and Wellness Policy to include them or any company-provided resources that can help employees improve their health and well-being. With a little creativity, organizations can also engage employees with fitness challenges or virtual group workout sessions at little to no cost for the employee or the organization.

PROVIDE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT
Poor mental health will almost always lead to a decline in physical health, and vice versa. Employers have a duty to protect the health of their employees, and mental health should be treated the same way as physical health. Look into work-related factors to determine how they contribute to either supporting or harming mental health before putting that responsibility solely on the employee. We recommend applying the hierarchy of controls to mental health in the same way you would to physical health to help you recognize and eliminate systemic hazards first before moving to frontline controls.

In addition to identifying and eliminating the root cause, employees need ongoing support. Mental Health Training for Employees will help them learn how to recognize and manage symptoms, and reduce stigma surrounding mental health issues for themselves and others. Ensure employees are aware of what SAD is and encourage them to use any additional resources or assistance, such as directing them to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) Policy or other benefits like counselling or therapy.
ACCOMMODATIONS

Just like any other physical or mental health issues, accommodations for SAD must be considered. Employees may require adjustments to cope with their illness without the additional pressures of work. Employers have the duty to accommodate for mental health illnesses the same way they would for a physical illness, but it is important that employees are aware of what is considered a mental health issue and what reasonable accommodations are. Employees don't need to disclose illnesses, but depending on the accommodation requested, you may ask for medical documentation indicating any limitation.

Each situation is unique, so like a physical condition, accommodations should be addressed case by case. An Accommodation Plan Form can help you come up with a customized plan for each employee, which may include flexible hours, allowing employees time for appointments, paid or unpaid leave to manage mental health issues, temporary or permanent relocation of employee's workspace, or modification of job duties.

FINAL THOUGHT

Because of the pandemic, symptoms of SAD may linger beyond the winter season. However, once the signs of SAD are recognized, employers can help with seasonal depression by identifying the root cause and providing the proper tools, resources, and support that employees need to take control, manage, and improve their mental health and overall well-being.

At HRdownloads, we believe workplace wellness is important for our team and for our members’ teams. That’s why we’ve created useful resources in addition to the ones covered in this guide. Our Live HR advice services are also a great resource when you have questions on how to improve your workplace to better support workplace wellness. If you'd like to know more, talk to one of our representatives today!