

Supporting Employee Mental Health in February: A Guide for Canadian HR Directors and Workplace Managers



In Canada, February is often called the darkest month, and not just because of the weather. Short daylight hours, cold temperatures, post-holiday financial stress, and long stretches without time off can combine to create a noticeable dip in employee energy, motivation, and mental wellbeing. For HR directors and workplace managers, this time of year presents a valuable opportunity: to proactively support mental health, reduce absenteeism, and strengthen workplace culture when employees need it most.

Why February Hits Hard in Canadian Workplaces

Many employees experience mental and physical fatigue during February. Limited sunlight can disrupt circadian rhythms, reduce serotonin levels, and contribute to low mood. Add in workplace pressures, deadlines, and rising personal stress, and it's easy to see why engagement can slip.

Even employees who typically cope well may struggle during this period. This doesn't always show up as obvious distress – it often appears as reduced productivity, irritability, increased sick days, or withdrawal from coworkers.

Common Workplace Mental Health Concerns in February

Canadian workplaces frequently see an increase in the following concerns during winter:

- **Burnout:** Employees feel emotionally drained, detached, and overwhelmed, especially after a busy January restart.
- **Fatigue:** Poor sleep quality, less daylight exposure, and seasonal inactivity can cause chronic tiredness.
- **Low mood and depression:** Some employees experience seasonal depression or worsening symptoms of existing depression.
- **Stress and anxiety:** Rising workloads, financial pressure, and family responsibilities can heighten anxiety.
- **Isolation and disconnection:** Remote and hybrid employees may feel especially cut

off during winter.

The good news: small, consistent supports can make a meaningful difference.

How Employees Can Support Their Own Mental Health

HR teams can share practical strategies employees can apply immediately, without stigma or complexity.

Prioritize Daylight Exposure

Encourage employees to step outside during breaks: even 10–15 minutes of natural light helps.

Use Movement to Reset Energy

Short walks, stretching, or light exercise can improve mood and reduce fatigue.

Create Healthier Work Boundaries

Logging off on time and limiting after-hours email can protect recovery time.

Stay Socially Connected

Encourage employees to check in with colleagues or friends, especially those working remotely.

Use Benefits and Supports Early

Remind employees that EAP counselling and mental health benefits are most effective when used early, not only in crisis.

Maintain Sleep Routines

Consistent bedtime habits reduce fatigue and improve emotional resilience.

Limit "All-or-Nothing" Thinking

In winter, productivity can fluctuate. Employees should focus on steady progress rather than perfection.

How Managers and HR Can Help in February

Managers set the tone for psychological safety. In February, visible support can reduce burnout and help employees feel cared for, not managed.

Offer flexible working arrangements

Where possible, consider:

- Flexible start/end times.
- Compressed work weeks.
- Hybrid options during extreme weather.
- Reduced meeting load on high-demand days.
- Even small flexibility improves work-life balance and lowers stress.

Encourage Realistic Workloads

February is a key time to reassess priorities. Ask:

- What deadlines are truly fixed.
- What can be delayed, simplified, or redistributed?
- Are employees taking on invisible work (extra coverage, emotional labour, training others)?

Normalize Mental Health Check-ins

A simple question like: "How are you doing lately, really?" can open a door. Managers don't need to be therapists; they just need to notice, listen, and guide employees toward supports.

Build Morale with Low-Pressure Team Activities

Morale-building doesn't need to be expensive. Consider:

- "Warm drink" coffee chats.
- Team lunches (virtual or in-person).
- Winter wellness challenges (steps, hydration, stretching).
- Gratitude shout-outs in meetings.
- A themed "February appreciation week".

The goal is connection, not forced fun.

Promote Psychological Health and Safety

Canadian workplaces increasingly align with the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace. February is an ideal time to reinforce:

- Respectful communication.
- Workload fairness.
- Anti-bullying practices.
- Supportive return-to-work processes.

Train Leaders to Recognize Warning Signs

Provide short refreshers so supervisors can recognize signs like withdrawal, unusual errors, irritability, increased absences, or emotional outbursts, and respond appropriately.

Supporting mental health during the darkest month is a good leadership. When Canadian workplaces treat mental wellbeing as a shared responsibility, employees feel safer, stay engaged longer, and recover faster from seasonal stress.

A little flexibility, empathy, and connection can go a long way in February and can set the tone for a healthier year ahead.