



Protecting Employee Health and Well-Being Amid COVID-19

An employer's guide to keeping Southeast Michigan's workforce healthy, productive, and resilient.

The fall and winter months may be the most difficult for employees, especially this year as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to bring challenges across all industries. As an employer, protecting the health and well-being of your workforce should be top priority. Employees are the heartbeat of your organization and if they are consumed by fear, stress, and anxiety, productivity and engagement will suffer.

This guide was developed to help employers protect the health and well-being of employees. Businesses large and small are invited to partake in the mission of keeping Southeast Michigan's workforce healthy, happy, and productive amid the pandemic.

There are several elements that contribute to a well-rounded healthy lifestyle. Four areas in particular offer the greatest impact on maintaining employee mental, emotional, and physical health in the coming months:

1. Seasonal depression and 'the winter blues.'
2. Flu vaccination.
3. Staying connected digitally.
4. Mindfulness, resilience, and sense of purpose.



1. Seasonal Depression and Pandemic Stress

After the excitement of the holiday season passes, the winter months in Michigan drag on. Sub-zero temperatures and little sunlight mixed with poor sleep and vitamin D deficiency creates the perfect environment for 'the winter blues.'

The medical diagnosis for seasonal depression is Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). The winter blues are a milder version of this. During a typical year, around [14%](#) of the U.S. workforce experiences the winter blues.

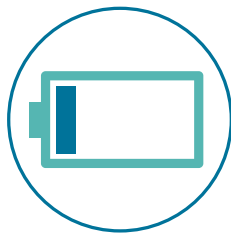
Will the pandemic make seasonal depression worse?

Chances are, yes. In addition to managing annual seasonal depression, employees will also have to navigate the stress of living amid a global pandemic. Cooler temperatures and shorter, sunless days will offer fewer opportunities for outdoor activity.

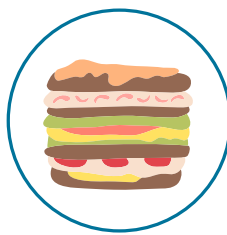
Symptoms of seasonal depression include:



Feeling sad, grumpy, moody, or anxious.



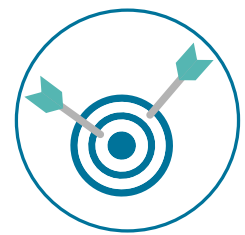
Losing interest in usual activities.



Eating more (particularly carbohydrates) and weight gain.



Sleeping more but not feeling well-rested.



Difficulty concentrating and lack of energy.

Strategies for employers:

Trying to operate at peak performance while managing seasonal depression and the stress of the pandemic can be draining, both physically and emotionally. While employers can't control the weather or COVID-19, they have the ability to [alleviate symptoms in the workplace](#) (in office or remotely) to cultivate a happier, more engaged team.

- **Regular exercise:** Encourage employees to maintain regular exercise as we head into colder months. Physical activity has a positive effect on mood. Gyms and pools in Southeast Michigan were recently given the all-clear to reopen. Share these [safety precautions](#) for staying safe as employees return to fitness facilities. If they aren't comfortable with visiting the gym, there are [creative ways to stay active at home](#).



- **Open communication:** Be open and honest with your team about the challenges seasonal depression could bring to work and home life. If you can establish an open dialogue with employees, they may feel more comfortable expressing feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression.
- **Light therapy:** If your organization has transitioned back into the work environment, try to maximize the amount of natural light around the office. If employees are still working remotely, encourage them to sit by a window when possible. There are [several health benefits](#) associated with natural light exposure. If natural light becomes scarce due to snow clouds, consider purchasing or offering rebates on [sun lamps](#) to mimic natural outdoor light.
- **Professional support:** For those who might experience severe seasonal depression symptoms, utilize an [Employee Assistance Program \(EAP\)](#) to help them find professional help. [Behavioral health counselors](#) are available to meet with employees via [telehealth](#). Be sure to keep all staff updated on insurance coverage when it comes to these services.

2. Flu Vaccination Amid COVID-19

As scientists and medical experts work on developing a vaccine for COVID-19, many healthcare professionals are advocating for routine vaccinations among people of all ages. As we near peak flu season, health systems are preparing for difficult fall and winter months as coronavirus persists.

Adults are strongly encouraged to get a seasonal flu vaccine every year to help keep themselves and their community healthy.

- From 2018-2019, **49.2%** of Americans received the seasonal flu vaccine while **30.4%** of Michigan residents were vaccinated, according to the [Michigan State Medical Society](#).
- An estimated **740,000** Americans were hospitalized and **62,000** died from flu complications during the 2019-2020 flu season, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#).

Establishing herd immunity:

Getting your annual flu shot is the easiest way to protect yourself and those around you from getting sick. With a flu shot, people who are young and healthy can help protect people in high-risk groups through “herd immunity.” Contagious diseases have a harder time spreading throughout the population (or our “herd”) the more people are vaccinated, explains [Henry Ford Health System](#).

“Vaccines are a powerful force of health and health development, and their globalization is not just a business necessity but a public health obligation,”

claims Julie L. Gerberding, executive vice president and chief patient officer at Merck.



If Michigan residents, specifically those in Southeast Michigan, continue to receive the vaccine at rates similar to 2019, experts warn metro-Detroit is in for a difficult flu season while battling the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ways you can help:

- **Educate employees on the benefits of flu vaccination:**
 - It can prevent the workforce and community from serious flu complications. In 2017-2018, flu vaccines prevented 6.2 million cases, 3.2 million medical visits, 91,000 hospitalizations, and 5,700 deaths, according to the [CDC](#).
 - It reduces risk of having to visit the doctor's office due to flu-related symptoms by [40 to 60%](#).
 - It is a preventive tool for those with chronic diseases. Flu vaccines are associated with [reduced hospitalizations](#) among people with diabetes and chronic lung disease and contribute to lower rates of cardiac complications among those with heart disease.
 - It can [protect others in the community](#), especially those who are at a higher risk for complications such as babies, young children, older people, and those with chronic illness.
- **Debunk myths:** Employees across the U.S. who plan to work remotely for the foreseeable future might not feel the need to vaccinate this year since they won't be around their community as much. While this is true, employees will visit their local grocery store, get a haircut, or have a doctor's appointment at some point. Flu vaccination importance is at an all-time high, even if your organization continues to work remotely. In addition, some employees feel the flu vaccine may not be effective during the later months of flu season if they get it now. This is also false. Scientists design the flu vaccine to last throughout the duration of the season. Encourage employees to get their flu shot as soon as possible, as it takes two weeks to start working.
- **Be flexible with schedules:** Whether your team is on-site or remote, allow them to adjust their schedules as needed to allow them time to get their flu shot.
- **Organize and on-site flu shot clinic:** If your company has transitioned back into the workplace, organizing an on-site flu shot clinic is a quick and easy way to get everyone vaccinated in one day. Contact your local CVS, RiteAid, or Walgreens pharmacy to learn more.
- **Offer an incentive:** While flu vaccination is a civic duty, some employees might need an extra nudge. If your wellness program has the budget to offer a small incentive for vaccinating, such as a gift card drawing, more employees may be willing to get involved.
- **Other vaccines for adults:** Depending on age, existing health conditions, job, and travel habits, other vaccines may be needed to maintain optimal health. The CDC created a convenient [Adult Vaccine Assessment Tool](#) to help determine what vaccines you may need.



- **Other vaccines for children:** Routine vaccination rates among children are low this year due to hesitation of visiting doctor's offices during the pandemic. Vaccines play an important role in determining the future health of children. Babies and very small children are especially susceptible to diseases, which makes vaccinating one of the most important items on the checklist in early life. [Here is more information about recommended vaccines for your child.](#)

3. Staying Connected

After seven months of minimum physical interactions, many are craving a sense of normalcy. Health and well-being may have fallen to the wayside as Southeast Michigan continues remote operations and social distancing.

For optimal health, it is important to note the difference between social distancing and social isolation. Even though the CDC recommends people limit physical interaction with one another, this doesn't mean employees and their loved ones should deprive themselves of social interaction.

It is important to stay connected with friends, family, and coworkers through digital platforms. This will have a positive impact on mental health and overall well-being as much of the business community continues to work from home. When employees disconnect from the rest of the world, social isolation and loneliness can occur, wreaking havoc on an individual's physical, mental, and cognitive health.

A study from the [American Psychological Association](#) found loneliness and social isolation to be twice as harmful to physical and mental health as obesity. The same study concluded a lack of social connection increases health risks as much as smoking fifteen cigarettes per day or developing alcohol use disorder.

Feelings of loneliness are linked to raised levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and difficulty sleeping explains [Nicole Valtora, epidemiologist at Newcastle University](#). These effects can lower one's immunity to fight off infections.

Keeping your team connected:

- **Invest in a communication platform:** If you haven't already, invest in a communication platform, such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or Skype to keep employees connected throughout the day. Platforms with built-in video features will allow teams to meet seamlessly.
- **Make webcams mandatory:** Video chatting provides a deeper level of communication that conference calls can't provide. Turning on your webcam can help coworkers see nonverbal behaviors such as mood, facial expressions, and eye-gaze. Observing non-verbal behaviors can make communication clearer and more effective, according to Psychology Today.
- **Organize virtual coffee dates or happy hours:** Utilize your company's collaboration tools to set up a recurring daily or weekly meeting for 30 minutes to catch up on how your team is doing. This is a great opportunity to ask questions, provide support, post interactive activities, and share helpful articles.



- **Strengthen relationship with community:** While we are unable to gather in large numbers in community spaces, there are creative ways employees can [support and empower their community](#). Acts of service are proven to decrease depression, lower stress levels, and help individuals stay active physically and mentally.

Here are some ideas:

- Call neighbors, especially those who are alone or elderly, to ask how they are doing.
- Extend grocery delivery or childcare services to neighbors who may be in dire need of an extra set of hands as the new school year begins.
- Start a food donation drive to supply local families in need with nutritious meals.
- Listen to your team: Employers play an important role in helping employees achieve positive health and well-being. Listen to the concerns of your workforce and react accordingly. Whether they are experiencing burnout or low financial well-being, find ways to share helpful resources and support.

4. Mindfulness, Resilience, and Purpose

Mindfulness is much more than morning meditation and weekend yoga - it is a powerful tool with positive benefits including improved attention, cognition, emotions, and behavior. When implemented in the workplace, organizations notice a decrease in stress levels with improved focus, clarity, listening, decision-making, and overall well-being, according to [Harvard Business Review](#).

Like anything, mindfulness takes practice. Most of us have heard that being present, breathing deeply, and taking short breaks contribute to a more successful workday, however, implementing mindfulness practices in the workplace looks a lot different than it did pre-pandemic.

Rework mindset:

During times of stress, it can be helpful for employees to rework their mindset. Brightening their outlook on the situation can have positive effects on emotional health. A branch of mental health, [emotional health](#) specifically refers to a person's ability to manage feelings during challenging times and successfully adapt to change.

Employee emotional health will improve if they can re-frame their focus around the positive things that have occurred since quarantine, rather than holding negative feelings or thoughts.

Encourage them to ask themselves:

- Am I spending more quality time with family?
- Have I reconnected with an old hobby?
- Discovered a new topic?
- Started a new exercise program?
- Tried a new recipe?
- Read interesting books?

Re-framing a stressful situation is a powerful mindset tool.



Resilience:

[Resilience](#) is the process of adapting in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, or other significant source of stress. Like any skill, resilience can be developed to help manage stress and emotions during times of crisis. Feelings of uncertainty stem from a lack of control. Employee lifestyles have changed drastically, yet they still have work responsibilities and family needs to care for. The first step in building resilience is to recognize stress as a normal human response to crisis.

- **Share coping methods:**
 - Deep breathing calms the central nervous system during times of panic or general discomfort.
 - Meditation creates a daily habit of quieting your mind and focusing on your breath to relieve built-up stress.
 - Daily exercise is a natural stress reliever. You don't need to engage in high intensity workouts to experience benefits. Simply taking a walk everyday will do wonders for the mind.
- **Communicate frequently:** Staying well-connected with your team is important during times of crisis. As an employer, your team is relying on you for guidance, transparency, and reassurance.
- **Listen and adapt:** The other half of effective communication is active listening. Asking a coworker how they are doing and listening to their response may not be enough, truly hear what they are saying and stay engaged in the conversation. Ask follow-up questions, share your own personal experiences, and show your support. By looking for communication patterns among your team, you may find it beneficial to address issues in a larger setting.

Purpose and passion:

Feeling a sense of purpose in life contributes significantly to overall health and well-being. Some employees may have discovered new passions during the pandemic, while others may still be searching.

Continuing to [pursue passions and goals](#) will lessen symptoms of seasonal depression in the coming months. If an employee can no longer participate in activities that give them a sense of purpose, you should offer new suggestions:

- Encourage employees to stay in the present moment throughout the day and not let thoughts slip into auto-pilot mode. Yoga and morning meditation are great mindfulness practices.
- Push them to try something new. Encourage new hobbies like the guitar, knitting, cooking, a new language, etc.
- Inspire them to learn each day by reading books, listening to podcasts, and watching videos that motivate and ["lift them up intellectually."](#)



- If schedules allow, nudge them to register for an online course and add a certificate of achievement to their resume.
- Encourage them to volunteer within their community. [Research shows](#), acts of service provide a sense of purpose.

Professional help:

A [Kaiser Family Foundation poll](#) found 45% of adults reported that their mental health has been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over the virus. While mindfulness, resilience, and life purpose can help release built-up anxiety and stress, sometimes professional help is needed. Talking with a therapist or [joining a support group](#) can play a significant role in maintaining positive mental health in the coming months.

The upcoming months are likely to be challenge for many employees. Join the mission of keeping Southeast Michigan's workforce healthy, happy, and productive amid the pandemic and beyond by sharing preventive health strategies with your team and coworkers.

Visit

[WellnessWorksDetroit.com/COVID-19](https://www.wellnessworksdetroit.com/COVID-19)

for more employer strategies.



Share Your Organization's Efforts

Social Toolkit:

The following resources are for your use in creating awareness about your participation in Wellness Works' mission to keep your workforce healthy, happy, and productive this fall, using the [Protecting Employee Health and Well-being Amid COVID-19](#) complimentary wellness guide. Below you will find key messages and sample content you can use to promote employee health and safety, within your organization and beyond.

Campaign Objective:

Protecting employee health and well-being during the fall and winter months should be a top priority, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to create challenges across all industries. To help you prioritize employee health and well-being, **Wellness Works** developed a complimentary guide, [Protecting Employee Health and Well-being Amid COVID-19](#).

This complimentary guide outlines key elements that contribute to employee mental, emotional, and physical health, especially amid COVID-19, and provides tips for promoting well-being.

Key Messaging:

- The fall and winter months may be exceptionally difficult for employees, especially this year as COVID-19 continues to create challenges for businesses. This comprehensive wellness guide highlights the elements that impact employee health and well-being, while offering helpful suggestions for supporting your employees during this challenging time.
- The wellness guide provides tips for having meaningful discussions with your employees about the importance of maintaining mental, emotion, and physical health in the coming months, with a focus on seasonal depression, flu vaccinations, social interaction, and mindfulness.

Social Media Post Framework Guide:

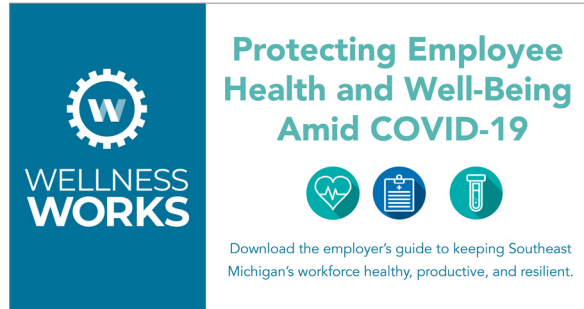
You're invited to share messages that promote your download of Wellness Works' [Protecting Employee Health and Well-being Amid COVID-19](#) and highlight your company's efforts. By sharing on social media, you can draw attention to the impact of employee health on productivity and the importance of supporting your team through this challenging time.



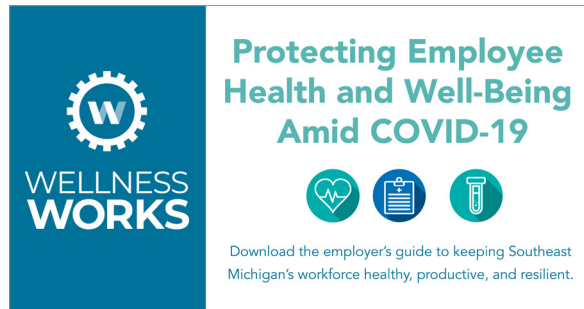
Suggested Posts:

Variations of these posts can be used on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, or on any other platform you or your company use. The following are meant to be examples:

Our team is prioritizing employee health this fall, with the help of the @detroitchamber's #WellnessWorks. Join us by downloading your own complimentary guide for tips on promoting employee well-being in the workplace.
<https://bit.ly/3if4rDb> #WorkplaceWellness



We've joined the @detroitchamber's #WellnessWorks in keeping Southeast Michigan's workforce healthy. Join us by downloading the employer health guide to learn strategies for protecting employee well-being. #WorkplaceWellness
<https://bit.ly/3if4rDb>



Tagging:

While posting on social media, please tag the Detroit Regional Chamber and Wellness Works, using appropriate handles and hashtag(s).

Hashtags:

#WellnessWorks
#WorkplaceWellness

Handles:

LinkedIn: @WellnessWorksDetroit and @DetroitRegionalChamber
Twitter: @detroitchamber
Facebook: @detroitchamber

