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## **Brighten the Winter Doldrums**

### **How to fire up employees during the post-holiday gloom**

by Matt Bolch

Steve Russell, president of Swanson Russell Associates, a 130-person ad agency with offices in Lincoln and Omaha, Neb., knows that Midwestern winters can be cruel. That's why his firm makes a concerted effort to bring fun to the workplace when the winter blues hit.

When employees start to feel sluggish after the holiday rush is over and the cold weather sets in, Russell is prepared with a litany of activities to perk up his staff, including pizza-and-beer Fridays, comedian performances, lunch-and-learns and chili cook-offs. Russell also offers incentives to keep staff motivated, allowing managers to give employees extra days off as a reward for a job well done.

"These events are huge recruitment, retention and performance tools," Russell says. "And they are good for me, too."

If your workplace lacks gusto after the excitement of the holidays fade, there could be a good reason. Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, peaks in January or February as the body reacts to the changing seasons.

Statistics vary, but 20 percent of Americans suffer from SAD or a lesser condition that Michael Terman, a leading researcher on seasonal disorders, calls the winter doldrums. Another 30 percent will experience one or more SAD symptoms, which include winter weight gain, a craving for sweet or starchy foods, difficulty concentrating, fatigue, irritability, avoidance of social situations, oversleeping and a heavy feeling in the arms or legs.

Seasonal disorders occur more often in northern climates and affect women more than men, says Terman, director of the Center for Light Treatment and Biological Rhythms at New York-Presbyterian Hospital and founder of the nonprofit Center for Environmental Therapeutics. SAD is a form of depression that requires mental-health intervention and can be cured with counseling and appropriate light therapy geared to one's circadian rhythms.

While activities like the kind Swanson Russell Associates throws for employees are fun, Terman says, more germane are its company-sponsored co-ed volleyball and softball teams and its help in paying employees' health club dues. To combat the winter blues, Terman recommends that employers put a treadmill in the breakroom or encourage employees to walk in the sun for 30 to 40 minutes a day without sunglasses.

"These are minor interventions, but they can help some individuals substantially," Terman says. "When people get down, the last thing they want to do is exercise, but it can significantly boost morale."