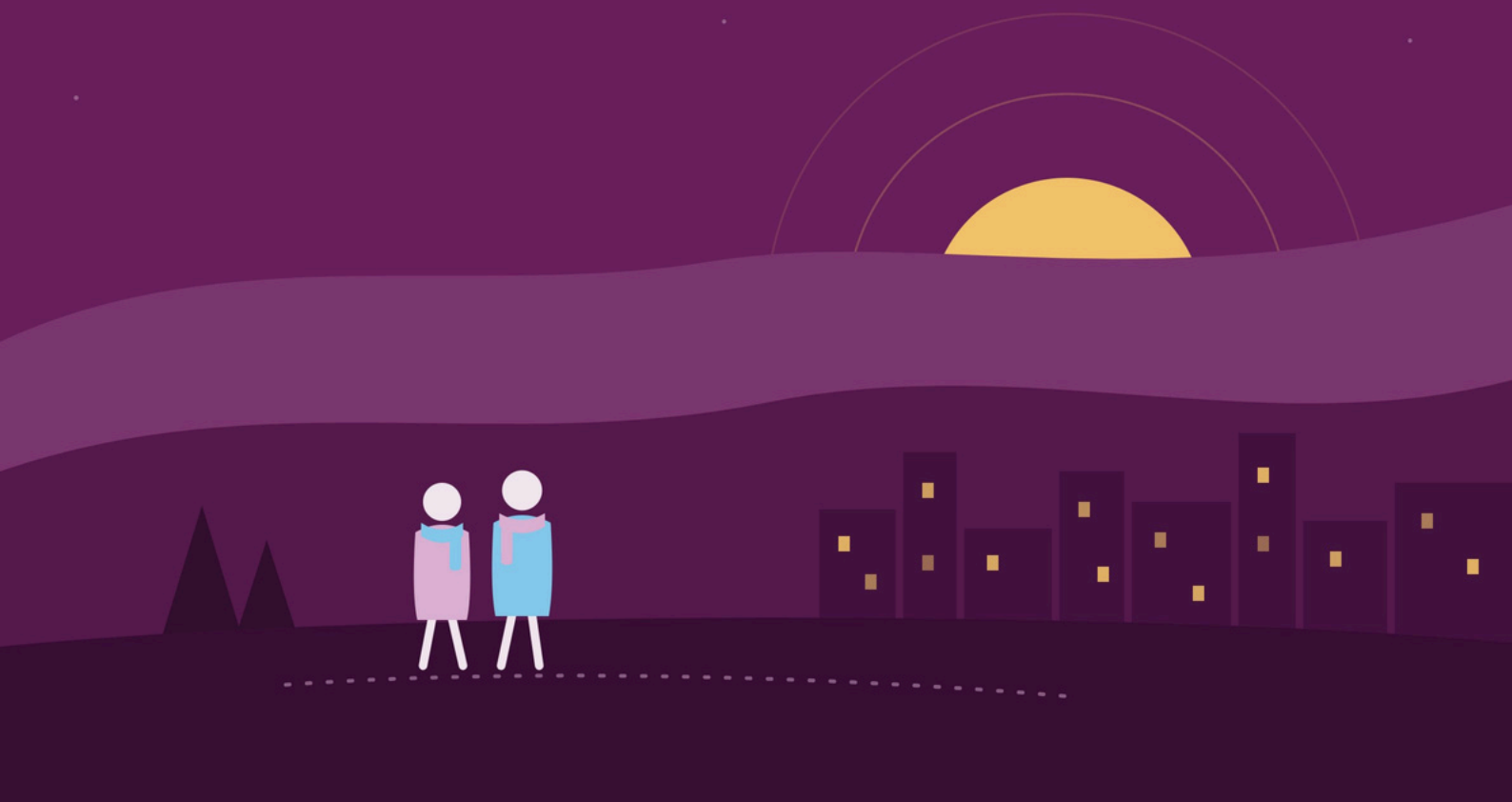
International Wellbeing Insights
People, Culture & Wellbeing

Stress Management Society
from distress to de-stress

A PURPLE PAPER · WINTER 2026

Winter wellbeing at work

Supporting each other through the darker months. A guide for leaders, line managers and colleagues.



BEFORE WE BEGIN

The season nobody puts on the agenda.

Winter is the one time of year when almost everyone in an organisation feels the same pressures at once, yet it rarely features in a wellbeing plan. Shorter days, colder weather, year-end deadlines, money worries and a festive season that is joyful for some and painful for others all arrive together.

This Purple Paper is for leaders, HR teams, line managers and colleagues who want to get through the season well, and help others do the same.

> ***Finding winter hard is normal, not a weakness. What makes the difference is connection.***

Low mood, loneliness and financial anxiety are common human responses to a demanding season. A workplace where people can say "this is a tough time for me", and be met with understanding rather than judgement, is one of the strongest protections there is.

964,000

workers in Great Britain reported work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2024/25

22.1m

working days were lost as a result. Winter adds to that load; small, thoughtful actions can lighten it.

Source: HSE, Health and safety at work statistics 2024/25

IN THIS PAPER

01 The season in numbers
02 What people may be carrying
03 Checking in well
04 Your best self this winter
05 The winter wellbeing toolkit
06 Celebrating inclusively, with a staff poll
07 Where to find support

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01 · THE SEASON IN NUMBERS

If someone is struggling, they are far from alone.

1.8m

UK adults expected to spend Christmas Day 2025 alone, without wanting to.

Salvation Army / YouGov, Dec 2025

1 in 6

feel lonelier at Christmas than at any other time. More than a third are too embarrassed to admit it.

Mind

33%

of Britons worry about Christmas's impact on their finances, rising to 42% in households earning under £30,000.

YouGov 2025, via Mental Health & Money Advice

42%

of parents say Christmas harms their mental health because of financial stress.

Nationwide / Action for Children, Dec 2025

1 in 5

bereaved people say Christmas is the hardest time to cope with the loss of a loved one.

Co-op / YouGov, 30,000+ adults

Up to 3%

of people experience clinically significant winter depression. Many more feel milder "winter blues".

University of Glasgow

24%

of workers sometimes feel pressured to drink at work events, rising to 38% of 18 to 24-year-olds.

IPPR / Public First, 2025

29%

of managers have witnessed inappropriate behaviour or harassment at work parties.

Chartered Management Institute

Most of this is invisible from the outside. A colleague can smile through the team meeting and still be dreading the weeks ahead.

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02 · WHAT PEOPLE MAY BE CARRYING

Everyone experiences the season differently.

These are the pressures most likely to show up at work, often quietly.

Low mood and low energy

Less daylight can affect sleep, appetite and motivation. Some people live with seasonal affective disorder; many more simply feel flatter than usual.

Loneliness and isolation

People who live alone or far from family, have recently moved or separated, or work remotely can feel more cut off when everyone else seems to be gathering.

Financial apprehension

Gifts, travel, energy bills and social invitations all cost money. For some, a £20 Secret Santa or a ticketed party is a real source of stress.

Grief and loss

The empty chair is felt most keenly now, whether the loss was last month or many years ago. Loss can also mean a relationship ending, or estrangement.

Family complexity

Not every family is a source of comfort. Some face difficult relatives, caring responsibilities, co-parenting arrangements or time apart from children.

Different traditions, or none

Colleagues may be marking Hanukkah, the winter solstice or nothing at all, and can feel invisible when everything assumes Christmas.

Pressure to perform

Year-end targets, reporting and leave clashes collide with the expectation to look cheerful and join in.

Health and recovery

Some are managing health conditions, recovering from illness or choosing not to drink, and find a season built around food and alcohol hard to navigate.

None of these is a sign that someone can't cope. They are ordinary responses to a demanding time of year, and they ease when people feel seen.

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03 · FOR LEADERS AND LINE MANAGERS

Checking in, done well.

The most powerful support is often a two-minute conversation with someone who genuinely wants to know the answer. Line managers don't need to be counsellors. Their job is to notice, ask, listen and signpost.

01

Notice

Look for changes rather than traits: a usually chatty colleague going quiet, cameras off more often, later starts, shorter replies, more mistakes, or someone suddenly saying yes to everything.

02

Ask, privately and twice

Choose a one-to-one moment, not a team call. If the first answer is "fine", it's worth gently asking again.

03

Listen without fixing

Let silences sit. Reflect back what you hear. Avoid comparisons ("I know exactly how you feel") and silver linings ("at least you've got time off").

04

Offer, then signpost

Ask what would help rather than assuming. Flexible starts on dark mornings, protected lunch breaks, a lighter load before a difficult anniversary, or leave on days that matter. Then point to your EAP, Mental Health First Aiders, occupational health, or the helplines in this paper.

QUESTIONS THAT OPEN THE DOOR

"How are you finding this time of year?"

"Is there anything that would make the next few weeks easier?"

"What's on your plate outside work at the moment?"

"How are you planning to spend the break, and is it something you're looking forward to?"

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03 · CHECKING IN WELL

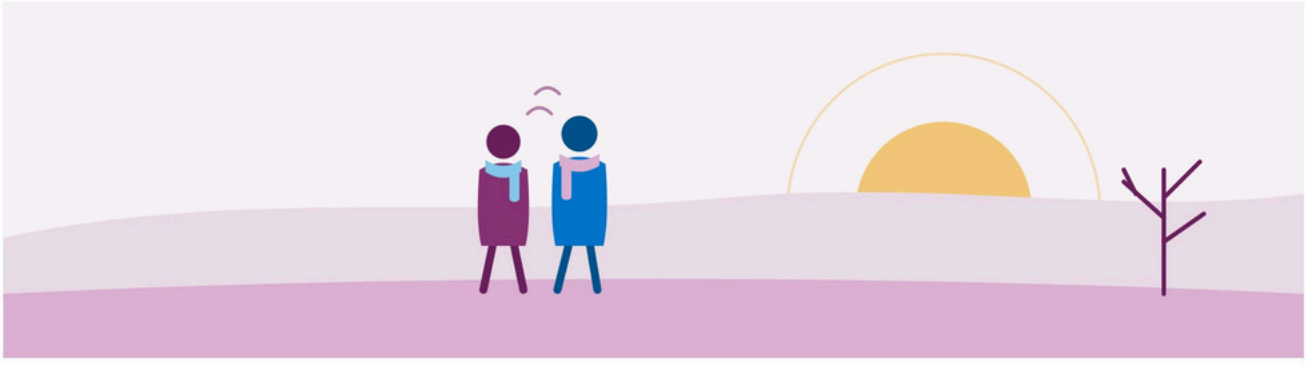
Small words, big difference.

INSTEAD OF	TRY
"Big plans for Christmas?"	**"Have you got anything planned for the break?"**
"You must be so excited!"	**"How are you feeling about the end of the year?"**
"Cheer up, it's nearly Christmas."	**"It sounds like a tough time. I'm glad you told me."**
"Everyone's coming to the party, right?"	**"Come along if it suits you. No pressure either way."**
"Let me know if you need anything."	**"Could I check in with you again on Thursday?"**

What leaders can model

Leaders set the temperature. When a senior person says "I find the dark mornings hard", it gives everyone else permission to say so too.

- Be seen taking a midday walk or a proper lunch break.
- Question "before Christmas" deadlines that don't really need to land then.
- Switch off out-of-hours messages, and honour leave.
- Share what you find hard, as well as what you're looking forward to.



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04 · FOR EVERYONE

Your best self this winter.

Being your best self in winter doesn't mean being upbeat all the time. It means looking after the basics, being honest about how you're doing, and letting others in.

Chase the light

Take your break while it's light, ideally late morning to early afternoon. A 15 to 20 minute walk outside, even on a grey day, gives far more light than any desk. Open the blinds first thing.

Take real breaks

Step away from the screen at lunch. Short pauses, a stretch, a few slow breaths or a walk to refill your water keep energy steadier than pushing through.

Wrap up and get moving

Warm layers, a good coat, gloves and a hat make an outdoor break something to look forward to. Movement of any kind lifts mood and energy.

Nourish yourself

Regular, warming meals such as soups, stews and porridge help keep energy even. Stay hydrated: caffeine-free herbal teas like ginger, peppermint, chamomile or rooibos are a soothing swap for another coffee.

Protect sleep and boundaries

Keep regular sleep and wake times, even over the break. It's fine to say no, leave early or choose a quieter season this year. Rest is not something you have to earn.

Be open, your way

You don't need to share everything to be authentic. "This time of year is a bit hard for me", said to a manager or trusted colleague, can be enough for people to understand and adjust.

Reach out, and reach in

Message a colleague you haven't spoken to in a while, or check in on someone who may be alone over the break. Small gestures matter more than grand ones.

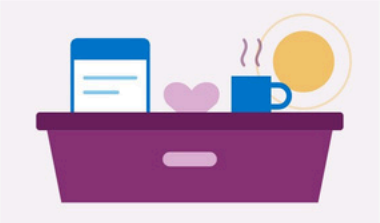


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05 · FOR ORGANISATIONS

The winter wellbeing toolkit.

Practical, low-cost measures for November to February. Pick the ones that fit your culture and your people. A few measures done consistently mean more than a long list nobody notices.



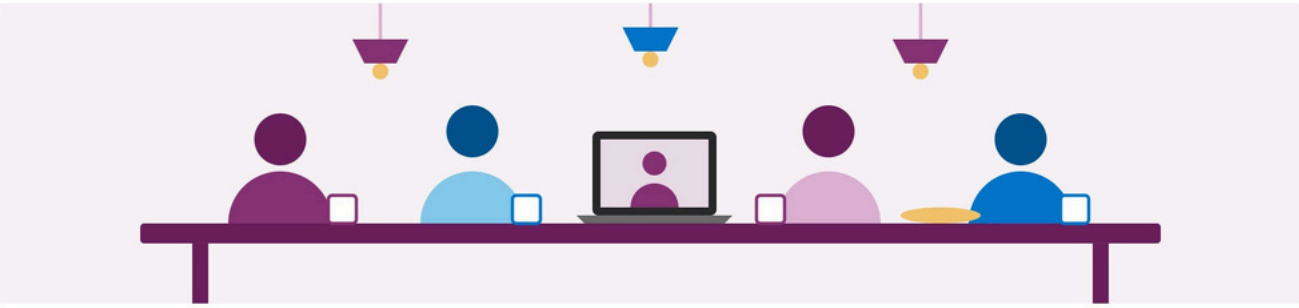
LIGHT & BREAKS	A **"daylight hour"** around midday with no meetings, so people can get outside, plus walking meetings and walk-and-talk one-to-ones.
FLEXIBILITY	Flexible start and finish times through the darkest weeks, and remote options in bad weather to ease dark commutes and caring pressures.
NOURISHMENT	A warm drinks station with herbal teas, soup days, or healthy shared snacks in place of sweets.
CONNECTION	A **winter buddy scheme** pairing colleagues, remote staff included, for a weekly check-in, plus optional "open door" virtual coffees over the break.
GRIEF & LOSS	A short manager guide on supporting bereaved colleagues, flexibility around anniversaries, and a quiet space or remembrance tree where people can leave a name.
MONEY	Financial wellbeing sessions, free debt-advice signposting and hardship policies, with optional low-cost gifting such as a £5 cap or handwritten thank-you notes.
INCLUSION	An inclusive calendar that recognises different festivals and observances.
MENTAL HEALTH	EAP, Mental Health First Aider and helpline reminders before the break, sent to personal inboxes too, and a **"how was your break?"** check-in plan for January.
WORKLOAD	Review year-end deadlines and agree cover, so people can switch off fully on leave.

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06 · CELEBRATING INCLUSIVELY

The best celebration is one your people designed.

The traditional evening drinks party suits some colleagues well, but leaves out many others: people who don't drink or drive, live far away, have caring responsibilities, work remotely or part-time, are watching their budget, or don't celebrate Christmas.



PRINCIPLES

Ask first. Run the anonymous poll overleaf, then share the results.

Daytime over late nights, for parents, carers, commuters and non-drivers.

Alcohol optional, never central. Good alcohol-free drinks as standard; venues that aren't pubs or bars.

Free to attend, with travel covered where possible.

Bring remote colleagues in with a hybrid element, a parcel home or regional gatherings.

Call it an end-of-year celebration, so everyone feels it's for them.

Opting out is fine, with no comments on who did or didn't come.

IDEAS BEYOND THE PARTY

A team lunch or shared potluck in working hours

A volunteering day or charity challenge together

A craft, wreath-making or cookery workshop

A winter walk, followed by hot drinks

A quiz, games afternoon or escape room

A gratitude wall or recognition session to celebrate the year

An extra afternoon off, or a "wellbeing hour" to spend as each person chooses

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06 · READY-TO-USE STAFF POLL

Ask, don't assume.

Copy these questions into Microsoft Forms, Google Forms, Slack or your intranet. Keep it anonymous, then share a summary and explain how it shaped your plans. If views are split, consider two smaller events, such as a daytime lunch and an optional evening social.

SHARE WITH THE POLL

"We'd like our end-of-year celebration to work for everyone. Please take two minutes to tell us what you'd enjoy. Your answers are anonymous."

1 **Would you like us to hold an end-of-year celebration?**

○ Yes, definitely ○ Yes, if it's the right kind of event ○ I'm not fussed either way
○ I'd rather we did something else, e.g. a charity donation or extra time off

2 **When would suit you best?**

○ During working hours ○ Straight after work ○ An evening event
○ A weekend day

3 **What kind of celebration would you enjoy most?** Choose up to three.

☐ A shared meal or lunch ☐ An activity: workshop, games, quiz
☐ Something outdoors ☐ Volunteering or a charity challenge
☐ A relaxed social with food and drinks ☐ A virtual or hybrid event

4 **What would make it easier for you to take part?** Choose all that apply.

☐ Near public transport ☐ Travel costs covered
☐ Finishing in time for childcare or caring ☐ Good alcohol-free drinks
☐ Food for my dietary needs ☐ An option to join remotely
☐ A quieter space to step away to

5 **How do you feel about alcohol being part of the event?**

○ Happy for it to be included ○ Fine either way ○ I'd prefer an alcohol-free event

6 **Is there anything else that would help you feel included?**

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07 · WHERE TO FIND SUPPORT

You don't have to carry it alone.

Share these with every colleague before the break, somewhere they can find them at home too. Hours can change over bank holidays, so check each website first.

IF YOU NEED	SERVICE	CONTACT
Someone to talk to, any time	**Samaritans**	**116 123**, free, 24/7, every day of the year
To text rather than talk	**Shout**	Text **SHOUT** to **85258**, free, 24/7
Help with money worries and how they feel	**Shout**	Text **REFRESH** to **85258**, free, 24/7
Free debt advice	**StepChange**	**0800 138 1111** · stepchange.org
Free debt advice	**National Debtline**	**0808 808 4000** · nationaldebtline.org
Support with grief	**Cruse Bereavement Support**	**0808 808 1677**, free · check cruse.org.uk for current hours
Advice for older relatives or colleagues	**Age UK Advice Line**	**0800 678 1602**, 8am to 7pm, 365 days a year
Company for lonely older people	**The Silver Line**	**0800 4 70 80 90**, 24/7
Mental health information	**Mind**	mind.org.uk

IN AN EMERGENCY

If someone's life is at risk, call **999**. For urgent medical advice, call **NHS 111**.

YOUR OWN SUPPORT

Employee Assistance Programme: **[ADD YOUR EAP NUMBER]**

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FOR ORGANISATIONS

If your organisation needs support, we can help.

International Wellbeing Insights works with organisations to make wellbeing part of how they lead, manage and make decisions. Winter is a natural moment to start.

Diagnose

where pressure really builds in your organisation

Develop

leaders and line managers with the skills for supportive conversations

Thrive

as teams, through every season

Book a discovery call · wellbeing.work

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THE STRESS MANAGEMENT SOCIETY

Our charitable arm. Since 2003 it has helped individuals recognise and reduce stress, with free resources, webinars and Purple Papers at **stress.org.uk**

INTERNATIONAL WELLBEING INSIGHTS

Our work with organisations. We partner with leaders, HR teams and managers on wellbeing programmes that last, at **wellbeing.work**

SOURCES

HSE, Health and safety at work statistics 2024/25

University of Glasgow, seasonal patterns of depressive symptoms, 2018

The Salvation Army and YouGov, December 2025

Mind, research on Christmas and mental health

YouGov 2025, via Mental Health & Money Advice

Nationwide and Action for Children, December 2025

Co-op and YouGov, survey of 30,000+ UK adults on bereavement

IPPR and Public First, drinking and work, 2025

Chartered Management Institute, survey of UK managers

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