



Inspire Workplaces Calendar, December 2021

2021 has been a strange year. We're beyond the lockdowns, furloughs and restrictions of 2020 while lingering still on the edge of normal life. Vaccination and infection rates are in a constant race. Collectively and individually, we continue to navigate new challenges and uncertainties in our lives.

Many of us continue to do our jobs from home; others have returned to the physical workplace. The stresses of life, be it family or professional, are often compounded by the turning of the seasons, when the days grow shorter and temperatures drop. At the best of times, winter in Ireland can feel endless, testing our physical and mental wellbeing. Loneliness and isolation are not unusual and the Christmas period attracts its own difficulties.

Things like seasonal affective disorder ("SAD"), which presents like depression but only at certain times of the year, can affect how we react to the onset of autumn and winter. Some people just find the condition a bit irritating. For others, it can be severe and have a significant impact on their daily life. Last year we were urged to look after our wellbeing over the winter months. We were encouraged to talk to those around us and reach out for help when necessary. While we should follow the advice of health professionals on being physically and mentally safe, there are some fairly simple steps that we can take this winter to stay well, at work and at home:

Get some sleep

Research conducted in 2019 showed that one in seven Irish adults is not sleeping enough, which can lead to impaired cognition and mental health. Sleep is instrumental for our physical and emotional wellbeing. When we sleep, our bodies and brains rest, recuperate and recharge. Sleep is one of the most important components of day-to-day happiness. A good bedtime routine boosts focus and concentration, mood and the immune system, keeping us in top form.

Drink in moderation

In Northern Ireland, 77 per cent of adults consume alcohol and half of them do so at least once a week.ⁱ There's nothing wrong with having a drink, particularly at Christmas; it can help us relax during the festive season. However, enjoyable socialising doesn't always need to involve drinking. Alcohol is a depressant and too much can leave us feeling irritable and low. This can play a role in arguments and disagreements. Also, alcohol causes an estimated three to five per cent of absences from work,ⁱⁱ so you could try to reduce the amount you drink this year by grabbing a soft drink or a non-alcoholic beverage.

ⁱ The Irish Times, One in seven older Irish adults not getting enough sleep - research bit.ly/3bR1AMq
ⁱⁱ Department of Health (2020) Health Survey Northern Ireland, 2020/21
ⁱⁱⁱ Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland, Drugs and alcohol in the workplace, bit.ly/3Dh8k0e
^{iv} Irish Independent, Average Irish adult expected to give up half a glass over festive season, bit.ly/3H1U177

Organise and succeed

Winter can be a very busy time, especially in the run-up to Christmas. Whether we're dealing with work- or family-related issues, things can feel overwhelming. We can stay away from these by leaving the office on time, so that personal matters receive the same attention as professional ones. Plan ahead and be careful not to take on more than we can handle. Don't be afraid to say "No" or ask for assistance. From a pre-holiday deadline to a big family Christmas, things will go more smoothly for everyone if tasks are shared and people pull together.

Look out for yourself and others

If you're spending Christmas alone, consider how you can make it a special day for yourself. You might want to book a holiday or take a trip, go out for a nice meal or keep to yourself and watch your favourite films. Volunteering is another option – giving something back and helping those less fortunate can have a really positive effect on your mental health. Many older people, for instance, will be alone on Christmas day. Why not see if there's someone else with whom you can safely share the joy of the festive period?



Stay active and healthy

We all like nice food at Christmas but, as with alcohol, we should try to avoid overindulgence. The average Irish adult can, according to Safefood Ireland, eat up 6,000 calories on Christmas day.^v Keeping fruit and vegetables in our diets is never a bad idea and so, too, is exercise. It may be chilly outside but, if we wrap up warm, we can still look after our wellbeing by being active in the great outdoors. Staying indoors for too long can be intense, especially if it's crowded. Opt for a change of scenery by taking a daily walk at lunch or in the evening – breathing the fresh air and enjoying the sights and sounds of winter – going for a jog or trying a cold-weather sea swim. If you stay well over the holidays, your return to work and the January blues will be much easier to face.

Remember, if you are concerned about your mental health you can always get advice from your GP.

You can also find more information on a range of topics from the Inspire Support Hub: www.inspiresupporthub.org