

# benefit fringe

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## winter workplace wellness themes

**W**inter is approaching. Even in warmer climates, some workers may be hunkering down inside if remote work and quarantines continue to be part of everyday life.

What can workplace wellness programs do to help employees improve their health during the winter months?

Rebecca Kotnik, controller at Wilson-McShane, a third-party administration firm in Bloomington, Minnesota, has some suggestions for wellness program themes that may resonate in winter, particularly in the time of COVID-19.

Kotnik, who is also the firm's benefits administrator and serves on its informal wellness committee, suggests that wellness programs can embrace the Danish concept of *hygge* (pronounced "hoo-ga"), which means a sense of comfort, togetherness and well-being.

Wellness programs could incorporate the theme by educating workers about the concept of *hygge* and offering giveaways that fit the theme, including a tablet (to encourage reading), comfy blankets, teas, flameless or traditional candles, and books on the topic.

"At first glance, this may not seem like an obvious fit for an employee wellness theme; however, it may align perfectly with an organization's goals to reduce employees' stress," Kotnik said. That's because *hygge* encourages relaxation and feelings of security, she said.

Another wellness theme that may be appropriate for winter incorporates the "sober curious" and "Dry January" concepts that have gained popularity in recent years to encourage people to rethink their relationship with alcohol. And it may be especially timely since excessive alcohol use has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, Kotnik noted.

"The popularity of this movement is a unique opportunity to promote a healthy trend that is gaining a lot of momentum," she said. "If participants adopt these behaviors and practices, it could have positive implications for the health plan."

Kotnik cited research that has shown that short-term abstinence from alcohol may have physiological benefits and enhance well-being and could improve everything from liver function to sleep quality. At least one study showed that participants were not likely to experience a rebound effect or drink as much as they previously did after a Dry January.

To promote the idea, wellness programs could share recipes for craft mocktails, give away books on the sober-curious concept or hold a Dry January challenge to encourage plan participants to try reducing their alcohol intake.

Wellness programs face a tough challenge in the months ahead, as plan members try to navigate the stresses of COVID-19 and winter. Incorporating unique themes like *hygge* and Dry January could be one way to help increase participation and drive results, Kotnik said.

