Your assignment for the office holiday party: come up with three Secret Santa gifts: a white elephant gift, a food gift and one that begins with the letter “R”. As if the holidays weren't stressful enough.

Workplace holiday stress can range from things like the minor, but true, example above to major bouts of depression and anxiety as workers juggle end-of-year duties with family responsibilities and issues.

“For some people it’s a very difficult time,” said Bert Alicea, vice president of EAP and Work/Life Services at Health Advocate, an employee assistance program based in Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania. “Maybe they recently lost a loved one, maybe they’re experiencing some financial issues... the holidays can compound these problem and create additional stress, anxiety and depression.”

The end-of-year crunch
Gretchen Stein, president and CEO of the Sand Creek Group, an EAP based in Stillwater, Minnesota, says her company regularly sees an uptick in activity around the holidays. She notes that for many businesses, they’re rushing to meet annual deadlines, which just adds to the workload for employees.

“Most companies we work with are on the calendar year, so it’s the end-of-the-year business crunch, and then you add all the things you have on the personal side of life,” she says.

And of course, workers are stressed by a range of family obligations. One idea that experts stress is that workers should be encouraged to take care of themselves — get enough sleep, watch the alcohol intake, don’t neglect the exercise routines. Even taking small breaks can help ease the stress.

“Take 15 minutes, if it’s sunny go outside and recharge yourself,” says Lisa Orndorff, HR manager at the Society for Human Resource Management. “There are so many extra pressures. Taking care of yourself during the holiday season also links to staying well. If you’re burning the candle at both ends, it’s not going to last very long.”

Orndorff said something as simple as reminding workers to stay hydrated can make a difference. “A great thing the employer can do is make hand out water bottles one day — just a little something to remind them to take care of themselves.”

Managing stressed workers
“Everybody's in a rat race to get their stuff done,” Alicea says of the holiday crunch. “We need to be able to slow this process down a bit.” So how can managers help employees do that? Alicea recommended the well-known concept of “managing by walking around;” simply having more interaction with employees in order to look for red flags of over-work or other kinds of stress.

“The managers can spend more time one-on-one with employees, just checking in with them, going to the lunch room to sit with people, just to see how they’re doing,” he says. “That can really go a long way, because people know that you’re taking an interest. If you can take an interest in them as a person first, then the work is going to get done, and probably will get done a lot better.”

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Giving workers a little more flexibility is a tactic that many employers are trying, and experts agree that it can be effective.

“We’re a big proponent of flex time,” Orndorff says. “Employees are generally more productive if they can work from home.”

Orndorff also counsels managers to take a deep breath when communicating with employees during the holiday season. “They should try not to take the stress out on the employees,” she said. “It’s important to take a minute or two to check themselves before they shoot off an email — the approach should be, ‘Let’s just get through all this together.’”

Rich Bayer is the CEO of Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services in Elkton, Maryland. He has listed 11 ways managers can help employees deal with holiday stress. Among his suggestions: make an effort to improve communication during the holidays; consider hiring temporary staff if the work load is overwhelming; be sensitive to cultural differences during the holiday season; and simplify stress-adding work activities like office parties and decorations.

EAPs — a year-round resource

Of course, managers and business owners have their own stresses during the holiday season, which is why an EAP can be an invaluable resource.

“If the company has an EAP, that’s a perfect tool that a manager can offer,” Orndorff says.

With 24-7, 365-days-a-year services, EAPs are ideal for helping with serious issues such as depression or anxiety during the holidays. But EAPs can address a range of issues, Alicea says.

“A lot of people still think EAPs are for drug and alcohol problems — if I don’t have that problem, I don’t need it,” he says. “But there’s a whole other side of EAPs that can help. Some people struggle with child care during the holidays, or elder care issues, or legal issues.” EAPs can help, he adds.

EAPs can also help educate employees about how to handle stress, and (importantly for this time of year) manage expectations about family get-togethers and interactions. “We talk to people about expectation, and what’s reasonable,” Stein says. “You don’t have to do it the way grandma did it.”

EAPs can also assist with the financial crunch that some employees experience. “We get a lot of calls after the first of the year with people who have spent too much money and need help with their debt,” Stein says.

But Stein and Alicea warned that creating a robust EAP program is a year-round job. They recommend regular communications with employees about what a company’s EAP offers, along with reminders during the holiday season.

“The time to batten down the hatches isn’t when you’re knee-deep in water,” Alicea says.

Isolation — the biggest danger during the holidays

Experts warn that the biggest emotional problem for workers during the holidays can be a sense of isolation — especially common with people who have lost loved ones or who live alone. The HR experts interviewed for this article agreed that managers should look for red flags among workers who may be late for work, having conflicts with co-workers or emotional outbursts, or withdrawing and becoming less productive.

“Social isolation is a big factor during the holidays,” Alicea says. “People who are lonely are already disconnected. By withdrawing, people can compound the problem.”

Stein said managers should be mindful of employees and co-workers who may be going through transitions or facing the holidays on their own.

“It’s important to look at co-workers and friends and see who may be making some major shifts in their lives,” she says. “Bring them into your circle or family — don’t leave them out there alone.”