

SEVEN WAYS TO KEEP THE WINTER BLUES AT BAY

Contributed by Heidi Roth, RDN, CHHC

Fall brings with it many wonderful things... crisp air and blue skies, apple picking and colorful leaves, and the fun of Halloween. Really, it's one of my favorite times of the year! But for many of us, the fall also brings some challenges for our mental health... specifically the shorter days and knowing that "Winter is Coming!" These shorter days can lead to feelings of sadness, lethargy, and depression, as well as decreased motivation to do the things we normally find enjoyable.

For some people, these feelings can be fleeting, but for many people, they are associated with the "winter blues" - officially known as Seasonal Affective Disorder, or appropriately, SAD. SAD is a form of depression that only occurs during the fall and winter months when there is less sunlight, which can affect your mood and energy levels. Light affects our internal body clock, known as circadian rhythm, which regulates our sleep-wake cycles. When this rhythm becomes disrupted, it can lead to changes in sleep patterns and energy. Reduced sunlight can also lower the production of mood-regulating neurotransmitters such as serotonin, also leading to depression. People who live far north of the equator are much more prone to SAD than those living in sunnier places.

So, what can we do to enjoy all that this season holds, while not letting the shorter days sneak up on us and give us a scare?

For inspiration, we can turn to the Scandinavians, who experience shorter days during the winter - sometimes only getting an hour or two of light during the day!

1. Maximize Light Exposure

There is a reason why Scandinavian design is minimalist and emphasizes bright and airy spaces - they try to maximize the light that they have!

- Open the shades first thing in the morning and pull back curtains to bring in some natural light.
- Go for a walk at lunch to maximize your light exposure, even if it is overcast.
- Consider getting a sunlamp, or light therapy box. This lamp mimics natural daylight and studies show that sitting in front of it for 20-30 minutes each day can significantly improve the symptoms of SAD. When buying a light, look for a 10,000-lux full-spectrum light.
- Put lamps on timers so the house is lit up when you get home from work.
- Keep a schedule and try to go to sleep around the same time each night.
- Know that after December 21, the days will start getting longer!

2. Eat a Healthy Diet with Adequate Sources of Vitamin D

While it might be tempting to reach for high-sugar, high-fat comfort foods, keep in mind that what we eat can have a big impact on our mood.

- Try to eat whole, real foods with plenty of fruits and vegetables (frozen is fine!) as well as whole grains and lean proteins.
- Omega-3 fatty acids found in fatty fish such as salmon and sardines, as well as flaxseeds and walnuts, are especially beneficial for supporting mood and brain health.
- You may want to discuss a vitamin D supplement with your healthcare provider as many people can have low levels during the fall and winter.

3. Stay Active

It's easy to slack off on exercise during the winter months, but this might be the time we need it the most! The mental health benefits of physical activity are well-documented, including the release of endorphins which are natural mood lifters.

- If possible, find an outdoor activity that you enjoy such as a walk to enjoy the fall leaves.
- If you have the right outdoor gear, it can make all the difference in getting outside!





4. Plan Something to Look Forward To

One of the keys to better mental health is always having something to look forward to. The anticipation of a happy event such as a trip and then savoring the memories can bring about just as much joy as the trip itself. It doesn't have to be a trip to a tropical island in February (although that would be nice!). What do you have to look forward to?

- A trip to a pumpkin patch or apple picking
- Holiday lights
- Football games and the Super Bowl
- A gathering with friends
- A themed movie night marathon
- A visit to a museum or tropical botanical greenhouse

5. Train Your Brain to Look for Glimmers

We are wired as humans to always look for danger or things that aren't going well. Glimmers are small moments of joy and positivity and are the opposite of triggers. When we notice and appreciate "glimmers" it can help improve our mood and decrease negative emotions! Make a list of the things you enjoy about winter and be on the lookout to add to your list! Some fall and winter glimmers to notice using your 5 senses:

- Snow or leaves crunching underfoot
- Crisp fresh air
- Curling up with warm blankets and soft sweaters
- Watching snowflakes gently fall from the sky or seeing birds at the bird feeder
- Savoring a hot cup of tea, spiced cider, or hot chocolate
- The smell of a crackling fire and baking spices

6. Stay Social

Darker days and colder weather can feel isolating and make staying connected more challenging. One of the first signs of SAD is social withdrawal! Plan a weekly coffee date with a friend or join a group fitness class. Check in with friends and loved ones, they may be feeling isolated as well.

7. Seek Professional Help if Needed

If lifestyle changes aren't enough, don't hesitate to find a mental health professional to provide support. They can help provide treatment options such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) which can help you identify negative thought patterns regarding the shorter and colder days and help you reframe it to more neutral thoughts, as well as focusing on aspects of the fall and winter that you do enjoy!

How will you prepare for the shorter days ahead? What are you looking forward to most?



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