

**The Chemistry of Calm** *Drug-free strategies for quieting fears and overcoming anxiety.* By Henry Emmons, M.D.

## **Fear Not the Winter Blues**

How To Thrive in the Bleak Midwinter

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The poet Mary Oliver tells us this:

*You do not have to walk for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.*

*You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.*

This is particularly pertinent at this time of year when cold, short days remind us that we are mammals---and, like other mammals, we have a drive to hide out during the dark months. We don't crawl like bears into our cozy caves, but we often want to.

Here in Minnesota we know we feel differently from October through April than we do during the longer days of spring and summer. During those lighter, luxurious months, our "soft animal bodies" wake up: we have more bounce to our step, need less sleep, and feel more upbeat. Then, as winter approaches, many of us notice a disquiet that goes beyond the fear of the cold blasts coming our way.

Slowing down in winter is woven into our genes. Biologically, the issue is the length of the days, rather than the temperature or quality of the weather. When the days shorten, the brain produces more melatonin, making us feel more tired. Because the release of this sleep hormone is tied to the sunset, when the sun sets earlier, our body wants to go to bed earlier. You may notice that you feel very sleepy in the early evening.

Since most of us don't actually go to bed at 7 PM, the effects of melatonin gradually wear off. By the time we do try to go to sleep, hours later, we may have gotten a second wind. Paradoxically, we may find ourselves staying up later than at other times of year. Then when the alarm goes off in the dark the next morning, we may feel like that slumbering bear, unable to rouse ourselves for the day.

The tiredness that is so common during the winter months, then, is brought on by the shorter days and our common tendency to get out of sync with our natural circadian rhythms. If that were all that happened, we could live with it. But for a large number of people, it doesn't stop there. As many as 10% of us living in northern latitudes will develop significant symptoms of depression or anxiety. Another 25% or so will develop the milder versions of the same thing, known as Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD.

We pay a price for the extra melatonin that we make in the winter. The brain uses the chemical serotonin to produce melatonin, so as melatonin goes up, serotonin levels go down. If serotonin gets too low, we feel anxious, depressed and may have additional trouble sleeping. Sleepiness from untimely melatonin release and low serotonin levels create the common symptoms of SAD: sluggishness, loss of motivation, excess sleepiness and sad or anxious mood.

## **Taking the Bite Out of Winter**

What can we do about this biological challenge? The answer is to trick your brain into thinking that it is actually summer.

### **1. Make the days longer.**

The best way to do this is with very bright lights. Exposure to bright light early in the day mimics an earlier sunrise. When you experience those lights late in the day, it seems that the sun is actually setting later than it really is. I advise my patients to purchase a light box and use it for 30 minutes in the morning (before 8 AM if possible) and another 15-30 minutes late in the day (between 5-7 PM). It is especially helpful to use lights then if you get very sleepy in the early evening.

### **2. Manage your sleep.**

You may feel like sleeping a lot will be good for you, but it will usually make you feel even more sluggish. Aim for about 8 hours per night, and try to get up at nearly the same time every day. If you sleep in by more than an hour, you will change your circadian rhythms. Avoid naps unless you sleep really well at night, and even then limit naps to 45 minutes or less in the early afternoon. If you need help falling asleep, consider trying a low dose of melatonin, which is available as a supplement without a prescription. I prefer using it only occasionally, and getting the sublingual form (that dissolves under the tongue). It works quickly, so you can wait and take it just before bedtime if you know it will be hard for you to fall asleep.

### **3. Eat like it's the middle of summer.**

Think of how your body wants you to eat in the heat of summer: light, fresh foods, including lots of green vegetables and colorful fruits; modest amounts of lean protein; and few carbs and other comfort foods that become so prominent around the holidays.

### **4. Make more energy.**

You make energy by expending energy. The best way to do this is through regular exercise. It is a cruel irony that those who may benefit most from vigorous exercise also have the hardest time doing it because of low motivation. It works best to start early in the season, before sluggishness sets in. Try to break a sweat, and work out for 30-45 minutes nearly every day if you can. Exercise in the late afternoon may help to reduce the early evening fatigue, and also improve sleep.

### **5. Add a few nutritional supplements.**

Here is my supplement recipe for warding off the winter blues:

- B complex (or a very good multivitamin): aim for at least 50 mg of vitamin B6; 100 mcg of vitamin B12; and 400 mcg of folate daily. Take half the dose twice daily, with breakfast and dinner.
- Omega 3 (fish oil or ground flax seed): Take at least 1000 mg twice daily
- Vitamin D3: 1000-2000 mg daily. Consider getting a vitamin D blood level through your primary physician, as some people need even higher doses.

## How to beat back winter blues

By Jeffrey Rossman, Ph.D. Rodale Health

At northern latitudes, many people experience a lower mood, irritability, decreased energy, and changes in appetite, starting around now and lasting until spring. About 10 percent of people in northern states experience full-blown Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), with depressed mood, anxiety, irritability, fatigue, carbohydrate-craving, and weight gain or loss. Another 30 percent experience sub-syndromal SAD, a low-grade version of seasonal depression. I have recommended light therapy for many of my clients to help boost mood in the fall and winter, with good results. However, I find it works best when combined with other approaches.

### The details

Some recent research supports a combination approach to managing seasonal depression. A study published last month in the journal *Behavior Therapy* by University of Vermont psychologist Kelly Rohan, PhD, found that combining light therapy with cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT, which focuses on observing and changing your own thought patterns) worked better than using either therapy alone. She found an 80 percent remission rate for patients treated with combination therapy, compared with 50 percent when a single therapy was used. (Only 20 percent of patients who weren't treated at all saw their symptoms abate.)

In a second study, she found that one year later, 36.7 percent of the SAD patients treated with light alone suffered a recurrence, compared with only 5 percent treated with both light and cognitive-behavioral therapy. Interestingly, only 7 percent of patients treated with cognitive-behavioral therapy alone experienced a recurrence.

### What it means

Light therapy is effective for many people who experience winter depression. However, it is not the only effective approach, and by itself it may not produce the longest-lasting results. Whether you experience serious depression or a bit of the blues when the days become shorter, learning to observe and change your thinking and behavior can be invaluable in lifting your mood. And using other tools to help will likely improve your odds of feeling brighter.

Here are some ways to keep the dark days of winter from dragging down your disposition:

**Create a strategy.** Your plan should include multiple mood boosters, including exposure to sunlight, exercise, social contact, and constructive attitude adjustment. As you find which strategies work best for you, build those into your life. For instance, some people find a midwinter trip to a sunny climate helps them make it through the season. Others find their salvation on the ski slopes or at the gym, or in coming together with friends and family.

**Let there be light!** Getting exposure to sunlight can be a powerful way to boost your mood. In fact, on a sunny day,

the brightness outdoors is many times greater than the light emitted from a high-intensity light fixture. If you can go out for a walk when the sun is out, put on your overcoat and get outside. Don't be daunted by the cold, but do bundle up so you'll be safe and comfortable. Treat yourself to the things that help you get out-of-doors on a cold but sunny day: a new, warm coat; snow boots; thermal underwear — whatever it takes.

**Buy some bulbs.** When you can't get any outdoor light, a high-intensity indoor light fixture can help. You don't need to buy a full-spectrum bulb; just use standard CFL bulbs with a color temperature of 4100 Kelvin. If you have the budget, you can try using a light box, which is designed to provide therapeutic doses of light to SAD sufferers.

**Get moving!** Boosting your exercise in the winter can provide a powerful lift to your mood and your energy. If your climate or job makes it difficult to be active outside during the day, find ways to work out at home or in the gym.

**Eat for energy.** Combine lean protein and complex carbohydrates in your meals. Limit your consumption of alcohol, sugar, and high-fat foods, all of which may temporarily lift your mood but then leave you feeling tired soon after. (See how depression and sleep problems and could be affecting your diet.)

**Change your thoughts.** Learning to think less negatively will help improve your mood. If you notice yourself feeling less peppy or enthusiastic during the winter, you can accept that feeling as a normal response to the dark and cold of winter without getting down on yourself about it. You can also respond to negative thoughts like "I hate winter," and "I can't deal with this," or "Winter is never going to end" with "I know what to do to feel better" and "Winter is a challenge, and I become stronger by meeting the challenge."

**Reach out.** When the world seems colder and darker, your connections with friends and family can supply the love, warmth, and stimulation to help sustain you.

**Reach in.** Your inner life can be a source of vitality and inspiration when the natural world is gray and seems dormant. Prayer, meditation, inspirational reading, and religious observation provide inner light that can illuminate your journey through the darker days of fall and winter.

**Get help.** If you are experiencing significant seasonal depression or have a recurrent pattern of seasonal depression, you may benefit from consulting with a psychiatrist, psychologist, clinical social worker, or mental health counselor who specializes in treating mood disorders. You can find a qualified practitioner by contacting your local mental health association, or the behavioral health department at a medical center in your area. You can find more information about SAD and light therapy from the Center for Environmental Therapeutics.