

12 ways to conquer the winter blahs

written by Dr. Ronald Hoffman | February 15, 2024



By now many of you—particularly those of you who live in the Midwest and Northeast—may be suffering the effects of a grey, sunless, protracted winter. It's been unremittingly damp and dreary here in New York City. The wan February light does little to dispel the gloom. Most of us have long succumbed to “cabin fever”.

Don't get too bent out of shape. Like many of life's rigors, this is temporary. And what's to say that February should be ecstatic? Think of our hearty forebears before central heating, indoor plumbing, Netflix, and abundant fresh food! There's a reason they used to call this “Hunger Season”!

Nonetheless, here are some tips on how to overcome late-winter torpor:

1) Light it up! You may be in the throes of SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder). Common symptoms include torpor, depression, carb cravings and inordinate winter weight gain. Light deprivation impairs serotonin production in the brain, and disrupts circadian rhythms. Some people are genetically more predisposed to SAD. Light therapy with an SAD light box may help lift your mood. But the timing of exposure may be key to the efficacy of light therapy, according to SAD pioneer Dr. Michael Terman. Take this handy self-test to determine the proper timing of light therapy for you.

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2) Anti-inflammatory diet: Especially in winter, there's a natural tendency to binge on sugary or starch-laden comfort foods. A consensus is emerging that you can optimize mood via avoidance of ultra-processed junk and liberal consumption of Omega 3 fatty acids, polyphenols and fiber. An article entitled “An anti-inflammatory diet as a potential intervention for depressive disorders: A systematic review and meta-analysis” appeared recently in the journal *Clinical Nutrition*. It concluded “. . . adopting an anti-inflammatory diet may be an effective intervention or preventative means of reducing depression risk and symptoms.”

3) Skip the Hot Toddy: Cold, oppressive winter weather may stoke your desire

for a warming libation, but alcohol has a way of undermining mood. Excessive drinking depletes brain neurotransmitters and undermines sleep.

4) Tan! In contrast to SAD lights, which deliver only UV-free full spectrum light, the sun and tanning booths deliver UV frequencies. Why do some people (think “tan mom”!) get “hooked” on tanning? It’s not just that they think dark skin makes them look good. UV light exposure has been shown to release endorphins, feel-good hormones that are also triggered by exercise, meditation, etc. Tanning also recharges mood-boosting vitamin D, which dips in winter. Safe tanning is not an oxymoron. Reduce your risk of photo-aging and skin cancer by limiting UV exposure, applying a light sunscreen to your face, and taking skin cancer preventives like gamma-tocopherol E, astaxanthin, and EGCG.

5) Exercise: Working out is a great way to dispel the blahs. On an icy or sub-freezing day, hit the gym. There’s nothing like a brisk swim in an indoor pool to cheat Old Man Winter. But don’t forget to get outside. A vigorous walk or jog can help acclimate you to the cold, provides light exposure, and the frigid temps will stoke your body’s production of brown fat (the healthy, fat-burning kind).

6) Steam or Sauna: Russians and Scandinavians have it right—they sweat it off in steam baths and saunas. This stimulates circulation, eliminates toxins, and provides a welcome antidote to seasonal blues. Note: Schnapps, vodka shots, scourging with birch branches, and a leap in the snow or a plunge in an icy river are optional.

7) Color Therapy: Amid those grimy, grey winter vistas, get a Technicolor infusion. I recently got mine at the Museum of Modern Art, and there’s an Orchid Show every year at the New York Botanical Gardens. Find your local equivalent, or just take in the radiant spring fashions at your local mall or department store (Tip: Leave your credit cards at home).

8) B Vitamins: B6, Folate, B2, and B12 are essential co-factors for

production of endogenous feel-good neurotransmitters like serotonin, dopamine and adrenaline. Cheap B vitamins are not properly metabolized by many people with a common defect of the MTHFR gene locus. Get an instantaneous mood-lift by taking a bio-available, methylated B complex like Methyl B Complex.

9) Tryptophan: Oral doses of L-tryptophan have been shown to be equivalent to light therapy in relieving SAD; moreover, in some patients who did not respond to light alone, provision of L-tryptophan along with daily light exposure relieved their torpor. Try taking 500-1000 mg of L-tryptophan two or three times daily, preferably with a light, high-carb, low protein snack. Yes, that's right, high-carb: Other amino acids from protein meals compete with L-tryptophan, and a small bump in blood sugar promotes transport of L-tryptophan across the blood-brain barrier where it's bio-transformed into serotonin and melatonin.

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10) Melatonin: Properly-timed melatonin administration has been shown to alleviate SAD. Determining when to administer melatonin is key to the therapy's success. This can be determined by a questionnaire (Are you a morning person or a night owl?), or via sequential measurement of saliva melatonin levels.

11) Make Soup! A cold bleak winter day is the perfect time to steep yourself in the delicious vapors of a warm cauldron of soup. Get a whole organic chicken and slow-cook it in a crockpot overnight. Strip the meat from the chicken and add to the broth. Season with garlic, sage, thyme, and bay leaves and add some canned organic tomatoes, sautéed onions, celery and carrots, cannelloni beans and shredded Swiss chard (Hey, I'm just riffin' here, use your own creativity—or try Leyla's go-to chicken soup recipe!).

12) Check Your Thyroid! Undiagnosed subclinical hypothyroidism or inadequate thyroid replacement accentuates the winter blahs. If you're cold, lethargic, depressed, have trouble getting up in the morning and can't help gaining weight, your thyroid may be to blame. Even if you're on conventional thyroid meds, they might not do the trick for you, especially under challenging winter conditions. Read my article on why conventional thyroid treatment often fails.

Alternatively, head south. I just did. I cycled for a week in Costa Rica, enjoying sunny skies and temperatures in the 80s courtesy of Backroads. I returned ready to face the rigors of late winter in the Northeast renewed!

Here's to beating the winter blahs... and have faith: this, too, shall pass!

If you have other tips for keeping winter depression at bay, head on over to my Facebook, and share them with the *Intelligent Medicine* community!