THE CATALYST

Seven ways to cope with the winter blues

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I'd like to share some ways to practise self-care when feeling the winter blues, which you can also use to help keep them at bay. Taking these steps doesn't mean you won't ever feel sad, but they will assist you in moving through the symptoms.

One point to keep in mind before I start: Feeling sad or blue when bad things happen isn't the same as having a depressive disorder. A major depressive disorder lasts for at least two weeks, affecting a person's ability to work, carry out their usual activities, and have satisfying personal relationships.

Also worth remembering is that how we experience a mental health problem can be different for everyone. What helps you may be different than what helps me. Yet we all have mental health, just like physical health. (Sidebar: I'd love to get to a place where we don't distinguish between the two — we simply ask, How's your health?)

Feel the feelings

Emotions need motion. When we stuff feelings down or try to stop them, they can come back tenfold. Have you ever tried keeping a beach ball underwater? When you release it, it comes back up with so much force. So feel those feelings — the only way out is through — and let the tears flow. Researchers say that, when we cry, we release "feel-good endorphins" that help us manage pain (both physical and mental). While it may not always feel like it, the old saying, "this too shall pass," is true. If you start getting concerned that you're crying too much (that is, more than usual) or can't seem to stop, talk to your doctor.

Shine the light

During winter, we may feel the impacts of getting less sunlight. The sun's ultraviolet rays help us produce vitamin D, which is vital for our mental health.

There is sufficient research to show that not having enough vitamin D can lead to depression-like symptoms. Consider including the following foods in your diet to help offset that deficit: salmon, sardines, cod liver oil, canned tuna, egg yolks, mushrooms, and foods fortified with vitamin D. Supplements can also be helpful but should first be discussed with a doctor.

Self-care

To me this means being in care of yourself and being a top priority in your own life. Some might think that's being selfish, but when you're in care of yourself you're better equipped to manage life's challenges and be there for others.

Self-care is also very individualized. It's not just about bubble baths, spas, and exercise. It includes things like healthy boundaries, healthier food choices, making those medical appointments, decluttering your space, creating a budget, calling a friend, and so on. I like to do things inspirationally (I refer to them as INSPIRED actions). The key is finding something that brings you joy and allows you to be your authentic self.

Your five senses

The fastest way to come back to the here and now and disengage from the mind chatter is to "stop and smell the roses." Literally. Go outside, take in a deep breath and feel the breath entering your body. What does it smell and feel like? Does it freeze your nostril hairs? Is it crisp, wet, warm? Feel it move into your belly, then give it a deep-barrelled exhale. Now pick up some fresh snow, taste it, feel it, throw it using all your senses. Next, lay down and swing those arms to make a snow angel! Grab a carrot, a few twigs, roll that snow and make a snowman.

Paying attention to our senses helps bring us back to simpler times, come back to the basics and, after a few deep breaths, feel a lift in our spirit! I know it may sound trivial but connecting to your five senses (and childhood) provides a fresh perspective and can do wonders to help lighten the winter blues.

Gratitude journal

Put your pen to paper and write. No matter what is happening, there is always something to be grateful for. Acknowledging situations, people, and things creates an energy and will attract more of that gratefulness. Not sure where to start? I feel grateful for my breath, waking up, warmth, my bed. Being grateful for waking up reminds me of my Auntie Tish, who we just lost to cancer last fall. When I went to visit her on her death bed, she said, "When I wake up, I give thanks that I didn't wake up dead!" It's a funny statement, yet so profound.

Perhaps you might be grateful for what has brought you to this moment. Every. One. Of. Us. has gone through stuff that has led us to this time and place. Remind yourself of the times you've come through hardships. What did you do then? What resources or people did you rely on? What skills did you develop: resilience, persistence, determination, grace, patience?

Sometimes we need to remind ourselves of what helped us before (and could also help us now). I can recall a time I had the flu, and I remember thinking, "How am I even going to get up, let alone go to work." Fast forward a few weeks and someone reminded me of the week I was off sick with that really bad flu. Ah, I had forgotten, because when we feel good, we forget what it's like to feel bad.

Keeping such a journal is also beneficial for our mental health. It's a wonderful way to get things off our chest and a great reminder of our experiences and reflections.

What are you thinking?

Take a good look at what you are actually thinking. What is your internal dialogue? Would you say these things to a friend or loved one? Are you your own worst enemy? Are your thoughts healthy for you, or are they making you unhealthy? It's easier to get into bad mental habits during winter's short days and long nights. I invite you to be mindful of the things you are saying to yourself, and challenge negative thinking if it starts to develop. For strategies on changing negative thinking, look to self-help books and to cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which is a great support for developing healthier thoughts.

CBT can help you to understand that the ways you think about yourself, and your situations impact your emotions and actions. Learning to form different, more productive outlooks can help you feel and act in self-enhancing ways. Doing so commonly involves pushing through anxiety or low moods, challenging negative thoughts, establishing, and pursuing viable goals, and looking after your physical well-being.

CBT is based on the idea that our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours are interconnected, and that changing one can change the others. While this may sound trendy, it's also effective and has been rigorously studied. There are CBT variations for all kinds of mental health concerns, from problematic substance use to anxiety and depression to schizophrenia.

Sleepy time

Don't underestimate the power of sleep. It impacts our whole self: mind, body, and spirit.

To maximize your healing zzzs, follow these healthy sleep suggestions:

- **Keep a consistent sleep schedule**. Get up at the same time every day, even on weekends or during vacations. Set a bedtime that's early enough to get at least seven hours of sleep.
- **Don't go to bed unless you are sleepy**. If you don't fall asleep after 20 minutes, get up till you feel ready for sleep. Establish a relaxing bedtime routine. Use your bed only for sex and sleep.
- **Make your bedroom quiet and relaxing.** Keep the room at a comfortable, cool temperature. Limit exposure to bright light in the evening. Turn off electronic devices at least 30 minutes before bedtime.
- **Watch what you eat and drink before bedtime**. Exercise regularly and maintain a healthy diet. If you're hungry at night, eat a light, healthy snack, not a heavy meal. Avoid caffeine in the late afternoon or evening (perhaps have chamomile or lemon balm tea instead). Reduce your fluid intake before bedtime to avoid those too-early morning trips to the bathroom.

Illustration by Garth Laidlaw

Garth loves to create imaginative, descriptive imagery to assist in storytelling in a wide array of applications, be it an infographic to accompany new food security data, or to depict a fantastical weather center that looks like Santa's North Pole.

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Lives in Tiny Beaches on Georgian Bay, which she considers her sanctuary. She believes that being surrounded by nature does wonders for her mental health. Yvette is the author of The Mental Health Contagion: Navigating Yourself Through a Loved One's Mental Well-Being Decline (forthcoming). Yvette is a mental health advocate, influencer, and keynote speaker; a psychotherapist; and a facilitator for the MHCC's Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) virtual certification program. MHFA is available for those who are supporting adults, youth, and/or older adults. It trains participants on how to recognize a loved one's mental health problem, have that conversation, and get the best help.

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