

Surviving the “Winter Blues”

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It’s the middle of January and I thought it might be helpful to share some tips with everyone for balancing out stress or potentially, the “winter blues.” Our lifestyles often make a dramatic shift in the winter time, so it’s not uncommon for stress levels to increase, loneliness to set in, or to just feel your energy drained.

First, I want you to **notice the daily routines** you have that may be contributing to lack of energy, feeling down, or lonely. For example, sometimes in the winter months I find myself actually going to bed too early, getting too much sleep, and as a result, feeling even more tired during the day. I often have to actually force myself to stay up later! (You may find the same thing happening for you, or possibly the opposite – staying up too late or not getting enough deep sleep.) Our routines are **those things we do daily**, usually without thinking about it. We call this being on “**autopilot**.” Our bodies and minds are naturally predisposed to create these autopilot functions for efficiency, so they give us the message that these habits are the best options on an ongoing basis, which may not necessarily be the case.

Sometimes we have to change our daily routines to fit the season. Sleep schedule is just one example. You may find it beneficial to change how or when you exercise, how much you watch TV or use electronics, who you spend time with, or which household tasks you choose to prioritize. Maybe you go out with friends more, try indoor aerobics, or learn something new? Doesn’t it make sense that our behaviors can benefit from changing in the winter months?!

Second, I wanted to provide you with strategies you can use to promote energy and positivity during these dark, cold months.

- 1) **Self-care:** You’re in a management or helping profession, and if I were to guess, you probably do a lot of helping others in your personal life as well. If you think about your needs as a bank account, you’re constantly making withdrawals and making deposits! The thing is, there is no fail-safe with this bank account – you can go into the negative! I don’t think anyone would argue that self-care is important, but it can be easy to not make it a priority, especially when you’re used to be the “helper” at work and beyond. Of course, self-care looks different depending on the person. For example, some people are energized by spending more time with family and friends while others recharge best by having time alone to wind down. Focusing on your health, whether it be medical, nutritional, exercise, social, emotional, or spiritual is a good place to start. I have a feeling you know exactly what you’re needing. Take a look at your daily or weekly schedule. Thinking gradually, is there anything, even something very small, you can do to begin increasing your self-care?

Some ideas!

- Get your nails done (with a friend or family member or alone)
- Go for a walk in the woods, snow shoe or cross country ski
- Yoga, Zumba, Swimming, create an at home workout (you can find lots on YouTube!)
- Set a new goal for yourself, maybe something you’ve been wanting to do for a while...
- Take a warm bubble bath or hot shower
- Cook your favorite bariatric friendly meal
- Plan a fun day trip for yourself (for the family)

- Allow yourself to accept help from a friend or family member – even though you normally wouldn't!
- Make that doctor's appointment
- Write in a journal
- Explore mindfulness or some other spiritual or grounding activity
- Reach out to someone you haven't talked to in a while
- Go out to a restaurant with a bariatric friendly menu for dinner or a weekend breakfast
- Host an herbal tea time with friends
- Spend some time alone with your significant other
- Learn something new
- Do something artsy
- Avoid nicotine, THC, alcohol, and caffeine – uppers and downers drag your body into highs and lows both physically and mentally
- Curl up with a good book and your favorite blanket
- Warm foot bath

2) **Environmental Impact:** This ties your routine, self-care, and mood together. We all have environmental stress triggers. Usually, we're focused on changing our inner dialog (i.e. "just think positive"), but our external experience impacts us just as much. I really encourage you to pay attention to the things happening around you that may be contributing to stress. I'm not talking about the other people around you, so don't turn to the person next to you and tell them they are a stress trigger in your environment! I am referring to the sights, sounds, smells, and feel of your environment. We're surrounded by a cacophony of music, TV/videos, side chatter, buzzing, bangs, and booms constantly, so I'd like for you to pay particular attention to the sounds around you. What would happen if you simply turned off as many of the surrounding sounds as you (reasonably) can? Isn't that why walking in the woods can be so peaceful? When our environment is quieter, it can help our bodies to calm down, allowing our nervous systems to rest. If you like having music, I would recommend you try music without lyrics, such as "mindfulness music" you can find on YouTube.

Some ideas!

- Clean up or organize your space
- Plug in a room fragrance at home or in the car
- Drive to work without the radio, podcast, phone on
- Avoid watching TV, news, movies, online videos that contribute to stress, anger, depression, trigger memories of difficult past experiences
- Avoid music with highly negative lyrics or even instrumentals that feel emotionally heavy
- Watch comedies or "feel good" TV, movies
- Youtube "baby goats"
- Cook something that smells good
- Buy yourself a bouquet of flowers
- Wear a nice smelling perfume
- Take some time alone in a quiet space
- Rearrange the furniture
- Wear vibrant colors

- 3) **Sensory Relaxation and Stress Relief:** Depression and anxiety can often times fuel each other. Sometimes doing things to reduce daily stress can have a meaningful impact on your mood. Stress is a reaction of your central nervous system. It's your body's alarm system. Your body also releases a stress hormone that takes your body a very long time to process. If you continuously have doses of cortisol pumping into your body, your body might not be able to process it all fast enough. Sensory relaxation skills help you to both prevent a buildup of stress hormone and calm your central nervous system.

Some ideas!

- Youtube the following phrases – Deep Breathing, Mindfulness for Anxiety, Mindfulness for Stress, Full Body Scan
- Light stretching, Yoga – these activities typically involve a deep breathing, relaxation component
- Take a hot shower, drink a warm cup of herbal tea, or curl up with a warm blanket
- Drink an ice cold water, step outside and let the cold air touch your face, use a fan or air conditioner for a few minutes
- Massage and other spa type activities
- Spend time with pets
- Take a nap
- Cuddle up with someone
- Watch or listen to something funny
- Exercise – indoor, outdoor, high intensity, low intensity

- 4) **Meaning/Purpose:** Sometimes winter months leave us with extra time we would normally be using for activities better suited for other seasons. Winter is a great time of year to explore new opportunities, personal goals, or experiences.

A great way to determine how you might use your extra time in a meaningful way is to take 5 minutes and list out 10 things that would have a meaningful impact on your life in the next 12 months. Important – you're thinking of the next 12 months, so the items on your list are things you can realistically do within the next 12 months.

Once you have the list, look through and **circle the ONE THING that would have the biggest impact over all others**. You can only choose ONE. Using a new sheet of paper, write that one item at the top. Next, decide on a "due date" for when you will complete this goal within the next 12 months.

Beneath the goal, list out the steps you will need to take in order to achieve this goal. (Break it down into small steps.) Now you have a step by step plan for achieving a new goal.

Some examples!

- I spend more time with my family.
- I speak French.
- My car loan is paid off.
- I'm enrolled in _____ school/program.
- I'm in a relationship.
- I knit 2 scarves.

- I read a novel.
- I vacation to _____.
- I say something positive to myself at least 1x daily.
- I go to the dentist.
- I have an exercise routine that works with my work schedule.
- I can tap dance.
- I play the piano.
- I write at least 1 blog post per week about _____.

I know this is a lot of information, but now you have it, so you can go back to it at any time.

You are AMAZING! (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpxXFxSNCF8>)

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