

7 Ways To Lift Your Mood During Shorter Days This Winter

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It's that time of year when the clocks change and the temperature drops, and many people find themselves losing energy, feeling unmotivated, and an experiencing an overall change in [mood](#). In places like the Midwest, where not only is it dark by the time you leave work, but the temperatures also fall below zero, people find themselves experiencing a variety of [depressive](#) symptoms, sometimes so different than the norm that they may even be diagnosed with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

Symptoms associated with winter onset SAD can affect everything from sleep patterns to appetite changes. According to Dr. Norman Rosenthal, "Every year as the days become short and dark, people with SAD develop a predictable set of symptoms. They slow down and have a hard time waking up in the morning. Their energy level decreases, they tend to eat more, especially sweets and starches, and they gain weight. Their concentration suffers, and they withdraw from friends and family" (Targum & Rosenthal, 2008).

While experiencing some of these symptoms may be cause for alarm to someone who is usually cheerful and energetic, the presence does not always mean that a diagnosis is inevitable. Many people have mild symptoms of SAD brought on by the same causes as those who are diagnosed. In order to address the symptoms and keep yourself from falling into the Winter Blues, here's a list of several ways to lift your spirits when the sun goes down early and there's a chill in the air:

Go Toward The Light!

As the days get shorter and sunlight becomes minimal, your body may experience a drop in Serotonin. Serotonin is a chemical in the brain that affects your mood. So as the chemical drops, you may notice a change in your overall mood. According to the American Psychological Association, "For the estimated half a million people in the United States who may experience winter depression, bright light therapy, known as phototherapy, is now commonly prescribed... For people whose symptoms are mild, outdoor time – perhaps an hour's walk under the winter sun — or greater indoor exposure to sunlight can help" ("Bright Lights, Big Relief: Treating seasonal affective disorder", 2006). Spend as much time in the natural light as your schedule (and the weather) permits! When the sky is cloudy and natural light is scarce, it is always a good idea to take some Vitamin D to enrich your body with the nutrients that the winter daylight is unable to provide. Another way to get your daily source of light therapy is to keep your environment bright and comfortable. Check out a [light therapy lamp](#) which can brighten up your office, bedroom, or other area of your home and help improve your mood and boost your energy.

Maintain Sleep Hygiene

When it's dark at 4:30pm, your body clock may tell you to start winding down for bed. Despite the change, it is important for you to maintain a regular sleep schedule. With the dark skies and cold weather, it is easy to feel sleepy and start yearning for extra winter naps, which can lead to nights of interrupted sleep. According to sleep expert, Dr. Tina Waters "One sleep model drives us to want to sleep and another keeps our sleep cycle coordinated. We want them in alignment so we can actually fall asleep... Napping re-cues the body's drive to sleep, so you won't be as tired at night as you need to be if you've taken that nap" ("Daylight Saving Time: 4 Tips to Help Your Body Adjust", 2016).

Mindfulness And Meditation

If the lack of sun has got you down, using Mindfulness strategies such as meditation or yoga can help you identify your feelings and improve your mood. Working on mindfulness allows you to channel your feelings and look at your thoughts without judgment. Meditation helps center your mind and body, and helps you escape from the triggers leading to anxiety or depression.

Exercise During The Day

Once again, get as much of that light and daytime as possible! As much as you are able, schedule your workouts during the day, and try to be outside if it's not yet a frozen tundra. Exercising during the day helps produce endorphins in the body which trigger positive feelings. It also helps boost energy during the day in order to be able to wind down at an appropriate time at night, therefore assisting in your maintenance of sleep hygiene.

Pick Up A New Hobby

With cold weather and dark afternoons, it can be tough to find things to do to keep you awake and interested. One strategy you might consider is to pick up a new hobby that you can complete at home, or channel a past hobby that has been long forgotten. Some suggestions include: knitting, crafting, woodwork, learning a new language, and writing. The best part about these suggestions is that each one can be completed in the comfort of your home, and gives you something to do even on the coldest and darkest of days.

Cook Dinner On Weeknights

When it's dark outside, it's easy to get into the habit of curling up on your couch and losing all motivation to do anything else. Ordering delivery night after night can add to your feelings of sluggishness, lack of motivation, and depressed mood. If you make it a point to plan and cook dinners on your weeknights, it gives you an activity to complete when you get home. If you want to improve your mood even more, make plans to have friends over and treat them to a home cooked meal! You will be active getting the meal prepared, and you will be surrounded by friends for a fun weeknight evening at home.

And Finally, MAKE PLANS!

One thing that I ask each and every one of my clients, no matter their symptoms or diagnoses, is "What do you have to look forward to?" It is so important to make plans and have something to look forward to, especially when you know the weather is cold and wet and the skies are grey and dark. Any stressor or trigger for difficult emotions can be improved if you have something planned that interests you, excites you, and makes you feel happy. Throw a holiday party for a small group of friends, plan a weekend trip, get tickets to a concert, or find a local event that does not require much money or travel time. If you have something to look forward to, you can help talk yourself out of those winter blues!