

Taming the Winter Time Blues

People often report feeling more depressed in the winter months -- overwhelmed by holiday hassles, depleted bank accounts, negative thoughts and images, and less satisfaction in work, relationships, or recreational activities. Other complaints include increased dissatisfaction or irritability; feeling low, inferior, or lonely; decreased energy or concentration; or disrupted sleep or appetite.



But we need not be helpless victims of the season. The causes of negative emotions, including the "wintertime blues," are best understood as reciprocal interactions between mind, body, and environment. Understanding how each influences the other can raise awareness of avenue for positive change.

What to Do?

Learning is the most essential process for moderating negative emotions, which can be managed in ways that contribute to healthy, adaptive living. Descartes separated the mind and body, and we've been trying to get them back together ever since. The methods below are ones that start from the "body" side of things and generalize to the mind.

- **Nutrition:** Regular intake of basic food groups in recommended proportions supplies the basic building blocks for healthy brain chemistry.
- **Physical Exercise:** Moderate exercise has been shown to be an effective mood-regulating behavior, probably due to enhanced energy and reduced tension.
- **Pleasant activities and healthy pleasures:** Do things that are personally enjoyable or "intrinsically pleasant" (humor, good food, etc.), or socially rewarding (interacting with people who are happy, interested, accepting, etc.) or that feel useful or give a sense of accomplishment (learning to do something new, planning/organizing, doing a job well, etc.)
- **Laughter:** Laughing has many documented health benefits, including enhanced coping, improved immune function, and increased cardiovascular fitness. (Laughing 100 times is roughly the equivalent of 10 minutes on a rowing machine!)
- **Relaxation:** Often described as a "calm alert" state where mental and physical systems are allowed to "let go." deep relaxation on a regular basis contributes greatly to a healthy mind and body. Some established techniques for inducing relaxation include: massage, progressive muscle relaxation, biofeedback, meditation, and imagery. Practicing a variety of these techniques tends to be more effective in the long run.
- **Medicines:** These may be helpful adjuncts to other methods, but have higher relapse rates. It is important not to give too much credit to pills. Antidepressant drugs can no more cause happiness than tranquilizers can bring peace of mind to person's own adaptive nature and skills deserve much of the credit for improvement in his or her mood and functioning.
- **Sleep Hygiene:** Surveys indicate there is a national epidemic of sleep deprivation that has many unfortunate effects, including disproportionately negative emotions. Good sleep hygiene includes getting up at the same time each day, avoiding naps of over 20 minutes, and avoiding stimulants within 8 hours of bedtime. Try to have a regular bedtime, but go to bed only when sleepy. If you're not asleep within 15 to 20 minutes, get up and do something calming. Avoid alcohol or sleep medications, and

practice tension reduction, and quieting bedtime rituals.

Mindfulness Matters

The "active ingredient" in fighting depression appears to be learning how to change your perception of events in ways that moderate emotional reactions and lead to productive actions. When practiced effectively, the following techniques are especially potent remedies for the wintertime blues.

- **Reattribution:** Adopt a perspective that recognizes that the truly good things in life are lasting, far reaching, and part of our nature, while negative events (such as failure) are more temporary, limited, and impersonal. This takes practice, but it's worth it.
- **Practical Awareness:** Monitor your perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and behavior; note the connections between them. then modify your perceptions with evidence. For example, you might initially be angered when hit by a stick on the ankle from behind, then be embarrassed upon turning around and seeing that the stick is a blind person's cane.
- **Cognitive Restructuring:** Recognize and learn to dispute your automatic thinking errors that contribute to overly intense emotions. If you find yourself filtering out the positive, over-generalizing, or mind reading: or when everything is a catastrophe, you should actively question your thought patterns (e.g., "have to..." vs. "advantageous to...", "dire need" vs. "want", "should" vs. "prefer", "never say never, always avoid always").
- **Emotional Validation:** Identify and clarify your emotions; then affirm the validity of adaptive intent of emotions (for example, anger as a self-preservation response to perceived threat). Appropriate awareness, moderation, and expression of emotions enhances healthy functioning.
- **Positive Imagery:** Imagine any pleasant scene, real or imagined, past, present, or future. Documented benefits include tension reduction, enjoyment enhancement, coping with pain, increased optimism, and relief from boredom.
- **Solve Problems:** 1. Recognize and define the problem. 2. Brainstorm alternatives. 3. Evaluate options. 4. Plan steps for action. 5. Implement and revise solutions.
- **Find meaningful spiritual or religious experiences.**
- **Self-efficacy and mastery experiences:** These experiences are often described as totally absorbing; for example, working tirelessly and losing track of time. Activities most likely to produce these experiences are challenging and require skill, clear goals, feedback, sense of control, and optimal tension -- the "zone" between boredom and anxiety.
- **Accurate Knowledge:** Avoid misinformation about the blues. Some of the most credible popular books on dealing with emotions include Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman, Control Your Depression by Peter Lewinsohn, and Learned Optimism by Martin Seligman.

Enhancing the Environment

Relationships with our environments, especially interpersonal ones, can both contribute to and relieve negative emotions. The methods below can increase meaningfulness and satisfaction.

- **Negotiation Skills:** Work toward relationship changes that are mutually satisfying. For instance, replace

demands with requests, change "You made me feel ____" statements to "When you did ____, I felt ____, and in the future, I would appreciate it more if you would ____." Avoid terms like "always", "never", and "should", and leave your opponent an honorable way out.

- **Acceptance Skills:** The best predictors of long-term relationship success involve not only skills for negotiating change, but also skills for finding ways to accept (though not necessarily approve of) aspects of the relationship that are not readily changeable. Acceptance works better in the context of adequate self-care, tolerance, and emphasis on positive and complimentary aspects of the relationship.
- **Pattern Changing:** Recognize cycles of unsatisfying interpersonal patterns and identify areas for change or increased tolerance. Frequent areas of concern are grief, dispute resolution, role conflict, and interpersonal skills.
- **Contribute to the common good:** Give through activities devoted to the well-being of significant others or of the community at large.
- **Elicit support from friends, relatives, clergy, educators, etc.**
- **Group affiliations:** Varieties include self-help, religious, social, occupational, musical, sports, games, hobbies, etc. Trying different ones may increase the chances of satisfactory benefits.
- **Physical surroundings:** Exposure to enriching sights, sounds, smells, touches, tastes, etc.

Practicing just a few of these methods may be all that is needed to relieve some symptoms of the wintertime blues. A broad spectrum approach (becoming proficient with several methods) is more desirable than relying too heavily on any one approach. It is important to monitor your response to different methods, and revise accordingly. Cautious experimentation is usually a good rule of thumb. If one method isn't especially effective, try others. Persistence generally pays off.

There are cures for the wintertime blues. Success is largely a matter of educated trial and error in finding which of several proven methods are useful at a given time. Most importantly, we do well to frequently remind ourselves that, whatever version of the blues we may experience, it is not cause for personal blame. We can limit the doldrums to effect only a small part of our lives and tame them through a number of strategies that will improve our condition. Remember that the blues are only temporary.

Are glimpses of spring already starting to show?



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