

Ways to Fight Off the Winter Blues

By [Therese Borchard](#)



People with [seasonal affective disorder](#) (SAD), or the clinical version of the winter blues, aren't the only ones who struggle with the shorter days, colder weather, and the general blah of the winter season. Less sunlight can affect the circadian rhythm, the body's biological clock that governs certain brain wave activity and hormone production. If you're human, chances are you've woken up on a gray, wintry day and wanted to stay in bed. For older people, and for folks with a condition like [Raynaud's phenomenon](#) who are sensitive to the cold, it's even tougher. I am not a huge winter fan, so I have to work extra hard on my mental health during the colder months.

Stock Up on Vitamin D

Since we get most of our vitamin D from the sun, it's a good idea to take a [vitamin D supplement](#) during the winter months. So many [diseases are correlated with low vitamin D levels](#), especially [depression](#). The [National Institutes of Health](#)'s recommended dietary allowance for vitamin D is 600 international units (IUs) a day. But *The New York Times* best-selling author [Joseph Mercola, DO](#), suggests that adults take as much as 5,000 IU per day. I take 3,000 IUs in a liquid, which absorbs better into my system. Certain [foods are good sources of vitamin D](#), including cod liver oil, swordfish, salmon, tuna, milk, yogurt, sardines, eggs, and cereals fortified with vitamin D.

Make a Book and Movie List

Winter is a great time to get to those books and movies you've been meaning to read and watch. A friend of mine challenged herself to read all the classics during the months she wasn't positioned on the sidelines of her son's lacrosse field. Since plenty of [research has indicated that humor can relieve pain](#), I like to watch comedy. My sense of humor is at the eighth-grade level, so I still laugh when I see [Airplane](#), [Grown Ups](#), or [Jack and Jill](#). Adam Sandler isn't for everyone, but he tends to be pretty effective at distracting me from a depressive episode for two hours. During the winter, that can feel like an eternity.

Hang With Positive People

This is especially critical in the winter when you're typically spending a lot of time inside with people chatting over a cup of coffee. If the negativity gets too thick, it can become suffocating. As I mentioned in my column [9 Ways to Promote Gratitude In Your Life](#), the people around you influence you more than you think. In one [study](#) conducted by [Nicholas Christakis, MD, PhD](#), of Harvard Medical School and [James Fowler, PhD](#), of the University of California in San Diego, individuals who associated themselves with happy people were more likely to be happy themselves.

Another [study](#) by psychological scientists Gerald Haefel, PhD, and [Jennifer Hames](#) of the University of Notre Dame, showed that risk factors for depression can actually be contagious when our social environments are in flux. If you hang around people from Minnesota, you might find that you love winter.

Try Something New

For awhile now, we've known about neuroplasticity — that the brain changes and develops over the course of our lives. We are not stuck with the noggin we were born with. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), researchers like neuroscientist [Nathan Spreng, PhD](#), of Cornell University can actually map brain activity when we learn a new skill and have [discovered that in the process of learning, our neurons become wired together](#). As our neurons send and receive information about the task at hand and become more efficient, it takes less effort for them to communicate to the next cell what is going on. Trying something new essentially rewires our brain. Take advantage of your days indoors to learn a new musical instrument (or maybe just a new piece of music), try your hand at a new card game, or maybe cook up something different for dinner.

Start a Project

There's no time like winter to start a home project, like de-cluttering the house or purging all the old clothes in your kids' closets. When a friend of mine was going through a tough time, she painted her entire house — and every room downstairs with two different colors. Not only did it help distract her from her problems, but it provided her with a sense of accomplishment that she desperately needed those months: something to feel good about as she saw other things crumble around her. Projects like organizing bookshelves, shredding old tax returns, and cleaning out the garage are perfect activities for the dreary months of the year.

Eat Winter Mood Foods

If you have a slow cooker, winter is a great time to experiment with tasty mood-boosting soups and stews. Some great [fall and winter ingredients](#) to include are squash (a great source of magnesium and potassium), eggplant (which contains fiber, copper, vitamin B1, and manganese), sweet potatoes (full of pantothenic acid, vitamin B6, biotin, and anti-inflammatory flavonoids), and turmeric (which assists with immune-inflammatory or stress pathways and hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis activity).

Use a Sun Lamp

In November, I get out my mammoth [Verilux HappyLight](#) from the bedroom closet. Bright-light therapy has proven to be an effective [treatment for SAD](#) because, as I mentioned earlier, less sunlight affects our circadian rhythms. Light boxes — flat screens that produce full-spectrum fluorescent light, usually at an intensity of 10,000 lux — are the typical light system used for SAD in clinical studies. Some health clubs offer light-box rooms where you can go sit in front of the boxes if you can't afford to buy one for yourself. It's important to position the light box according to the manufacturer's instructions, and to use it at the same time each day, typically for 30 to 60 minutes. Most people get the best results when they use a light box before 10 a.m.

Sit By the Fire

It's primal, that feeling you get when you stick your face into a hot glowing body of flames. There's something so consoling about staring into the embers and warming your hands by their heat. But you need not go to the trouble of building a fire in your house: You can borrow someone else's fire — even a coffee shop's — or you can simply light a few candles and enjoy a primal moment to remind you that you belong to this world of human beings that have sat around fires for thousands of years to get warm and enjoy a moment of stillness.