

# Moving Through the Winter Blues



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By Dr. Marnie Burkman  
Photo by Rachael Waring

“In dark silence comes whisperings of new beginnings.” ~ Mara Freeman

Graceful snowfall...icy chill in the air...dim sunlight...long nights. Winter is a quiet, beautiful, inwardly reflective season. For many people, it also heralds a time where one's mood drops into depression. There is a tendency to withdraw from activities that otherwise would be enjoyable. Energy levels and food choices are thrown off-balance, and thought patterns become more negative.

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The energy of winter is one of quiet stillness and, in that stillness, darker tendencies of the mind and emotions can arise and become more obvious. There are various theories as to why this happens, from low vitamin D levels or release of excess melatonin (a hormone that regulates sleep/wake cycles) to the psychological response of turning a naturally inwardly-reflective time against oneself.

If this happens to you, it could present a wonderful opportunity to take stock of one's life and one's personal tendencies and relationships. New, healthier choices can be made from these observations. What a marvelous space winter allows for this deeper life reflection!

However, if this self-reflection and quietness turns into serious depression, isolation, and fatigue that impedes growth and health, outside interventions may be necessary to promote healing through this time. For the “winter blues,” also called Seasonal Affective Disorder (S.A.D.), the following interventions have been found to be helpful for many people.

- **Phototherapy:** Typical treatment involves close exposure to a light box that emits 10,000 lux (intensity) of filtered fluorescent light for about 30 minutes each morning throughout the winter season. Spending time outside exposed to sunlight on a daily basis, if possible, is also powerful.
- **Dawn simulator:** A great adjunct to phototherapy, this device attaches to light fixtures by one's bedside and simulates an artificial dawn, typically starting 1 to 1-1/2 hours prior to normal waking time.
- **Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT):** This form of psychotherapy examines thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that contribute to depression and trains one to have healthier responses. A 2008 study from the University of Vermont found that participants who received a course of CBT both reduced their depressive symptoms during the winter of their treatment and were less likely to experience a recurrence of depression the following year. These studies also suggested that CBT, and CBT combined with phototherapy, may be more effective than phototherapy alone.
- **Negative ion exposure:** These negatively charged particles are emitted in nature and are found near waterfalls, after a rainstorm, near pounding surf, circulating in mountain air, and even from burning beeswax candles. There is some evidence that exposure to negative ions on a daily basis has an antidepressant effect similar to phototherapy.

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- **Daily aerobic exercise:** This is one of the most powerful treatments for depression and can be combined with any other approach.
- **Social contact:** This is critical when one's tendency may be to isolate.
- **Dietary changes:** Instead of overloading on processed carbohydrates, include protein-rich foods in your diet such as fish or eggs. Avoid products containing white sugar or white flour and consume a variety of fruits and vegetables. An evaluation from a nutritionist can be helpful.
- **Color therapy:** Surround yourself with, and dress in, warm colors like reds, oranges and yellows that reflect the color of the sun. Color therapy can stimulate subtle mood and energy shifts.
- **Nutritional/hormonal balance:** Get evaluation and treatment for conditions such as vitamin D deficiency or hypothyroidism.
- **Seek help:** Meet with a mental health professional who can guide you in an individual treatment plan, especially if your depression is more severe.

Whether your response to winter is joy, occasional blues, or serious depression, and whether nurturing your healing using any of the above interventions is necessary, it is important to remember the symbolism of what this season offers. Underneath the dormant ground, the earth is stirring with seeds and life force that will spring with new growth when the timing is right. What is the new growth you wish to see in your life in the coming year? What changes — inner and outer — are needed to cultivate this growth? This is the time to reflect on your life, to set forth these intentions for new growth, and to begin to plan for how any personal changes will be nurtured and allowed to bloom in the spring.

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