



Getting up in the dark... driving home from work in the dark... and getting a soaking every time you set foot outside the house. With winter well and truly here and the shortest day looming, many of us feel our mood start to dip at the thought of another rainy commute or freezing evening.

But how normal are the winter blues? And at what point should you seek help if you're struggling to lift your mood?

Most of us have heard of Seasonal Affective Disorder (S.A.D), defined by the NHS as a type of depression that comes and goes in a seasonal pattern, most often during the winter months. But mental health professionals tend to regard it as falling beneath the umbrella of recurrent depressive disorders, rather than a separate condition.

Dr David Bell, specialist registrar in general adult psychiatry and medical psychotherapy at the Belfast HSC Trust, and member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, explains: "S.A.D is a term that is common in popular culture, but psychiatrists tend to think of it as part of a depressive condition – rather than a diagnosis in its own right.

"It's very common for us all to face challenges with our mental health during the winter months – but if this becomes a more persistent low mood and lack of enjoyment in normal pleasures then at that point it's worth speaking to your GP"

Pat Lynch, head of education at depression charity Aware NI, agrees. "We sometimes refer to the 'winter blues' or 'winter depression,'" he says. "Most of us feel



# Winter-proof YOUR MOOD

How can you guard against the winter blues?  
*Jade Beecroft* finds out more about Seasonal Affective Disorder

rundown at some point during the winter months and there are plenty of lifestyle changes you can make to give yourself a boost.

"But if you've made these changes and your low mood persists for more than two weeks, at that point we'd advise speaking to a doctor."

So what are the lifestyle changes you can make to bring back the spring in your step?

## Get outdoors

It may seem counterintuitive when the very

thing that's bringing your mood down is the weather, but experts agree that getting outside and exercising in the fresh air can do you a power of good. Sunlight triggers the production of feel-good chemicals serotonin and melatonin – not to mention Vitamin D which can help ward off colds.

"Daylight has a direct effect on the brain, so when the days are short it's about making the most of it," explains Pat. "It's especially important to take advantage of the good days; so when the sun does shine, get out in the garden, head to the beach or

go for a woodland walk.

"Even when it's raining you can still go outside as long as you dress for the weather. Remember the old saying 'it's not bad weather – just bad clothing'"

Dog owners typically reap the mental health benefits of pet ownership during the winter months because they are drawn outside whatever the weather.

"I tend to notice people out walking more during the winter, probably because I admire them," laughs Dr Bell. "If you've got a dog you really do have to take it for a walk, rain or shine. Dog walking can be quite sociable too; you often have regular routes and times so you know other dog walkers to say 'hello' to.

"As human creatures we respond to daylight. Taking a brief walk during daylight hours can do wonders to regulate our natural rhythms."

## Don't sleep in

The dark mornings may seem like the perfect excuse to hit the snooze button or enjoy a weekend lie-in, but it's better for your body clock if you stick to a normal routine.



"We tell people with depression to concentrate on putting their first foot on the floor," says Pat. "Get up, open the curtains, take a shower and get dressed. It can be the hardest thing to do when you're feeling low.

"After the clocks go back it can be tough getting up in the dark. But we know it's going to be light from around 8am to 4pm so it's about making the most of that time. If you're struggling to get up then go to bed earlier instead.

"Making the most of the available daylight is a much cheaper and easier way to boost your mood than buying light boxes that simulate it."

Our sleep, exercise and diet routines can all change in the winter, especially around Christmas time. It's important to realise that there's a difference between normal reactions to life's ups and downs, and clinical depression.

"Remember that Christmas isn't a happy time for everybody," says Dr Bell. "If you've suffered a bereavement, for example, it can be incredibly difficult.

"It's important to understand that it's okay to feel down due to life events; that's part of the human experience. Try to stick with the daily routines that you follow during your happier times."

## Socialise

It can be tempting to cancel that coffee date or night out when it's cold outside, but being flakey with your mates will do you more harm than good.

"Social contact is one of the best ways to give yourself a natural boost," says Dr Bell. "Nurture your existing friendships and catch up with family.

"Winter is also a great time to start doing something new, like a class, course or volunteering, and make new friends."

Volunteering organisations like homeless charities, animal shelters and soup kitchens always need extra support during the winter months.

## FIVE WINTER ACTIVITIES TO ENJOY:

- Dig out your thickest coat and bobble hat and go for a bracing walk at your nearest beach or wood.
- Draw the curtains, make a mug of hot chocolate and curl up with that novel you've been meaning to read all year.
- Go through your favourite photos of the year and print them off for a scrap book, or use one of the many online photobook tools. They make brilliant Christmas presents too.
- Winter is a great time to take stock in the garden. Cut shrubs back, mulch growing beds, weed and generally prepare for the coming year.
- Take on a decorating project. Pimp an old Ikea Billy bookcase, give an unloved room a lick of paint, or head to antiques shops for a spot of bargain hunting.

Colleges and evening classes tend to start a new term in the new year so it's a great time to sign up for a course or start a new hobby. Pick something artistic or creative; something you'll really enjoy and look forward to.

There are plenty of grassroots sports teams and leagues running throughout the winter too.

"Contact with other people is really important," agrees Pat. "Again this is where going outdoors can be of benefit; you're more likely to bump into people to chat to at your local park or garden centre."

## Be proactive

We all feel better when we're being productive, so set goals for the day and congratulate yourself when you stick to them.

"It can be tough at this time of year because TV scheduling is good – there's Christmas movies, big shows like Strictly and X-Factor; there's always something on the box if you want to stay indoors," says Dr Bell.

"You can also find yourself sitting on the sofa, scrolling on your phone. But if you're feeling low, social media can even have a detrimental effect.

"Try to go easy on screen time. It's much better to go out, meet up with other people or engage with nature instead."

There are plenty of ways to reach out and seek help if you're feeling low, from mental health support groups to talking therapies and volunteering projects.

"You could do some conservation or outreach volunteering, which will get you outdoors at the same time," advises Pat. "Prevention is often the best cure."

Dr Bell adds: "We have no problem spending money on our appearance or fitness, such as gym memberships, but perhaps the money might be better spent on some talking therapy if you're feeling low. Your mental health is just as important." **NW**