

Tips for dealing with Blue Monday

Today is often touted as the most depressing day of the year, Blue Monday. Christmas is behind us and it's a long stretch of winter ahead until Spring. The temptation is to hunker down indoors and hibernate, but our top tip for dealing with Blue Monday and January in general is to get outside as much as possible. We may wake up a bit grumpy, feeling the winter blues but as the day progresses we can begin to feel happier if we spend some time outdoors.

So many of us, in the depths of winter, get most of our light artificially from screens and desk-lamps. Humans aren't meant to spend so much time indoors. Our ancestors were hunter-gatherers spending most of their time outdoors amongst trees, by water, studying plants and animals, in all seasons and weather. Could our health and wellbeing be compromised because we spend less time outdoors? The shorter days of light drain us of energy, meaning some of us will experience seasonal lethargy, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) and depression. There is evidence that exercise outside can be more effective than antidepressants for those with mild to moderate depression.

There are several physiological and neurological changes that take place when we go outside which can boost the happiness chemicals in our brain. Serotonin is a compound that carries signals between nerve cells and there is a link between the levels of serotonin in our brain and our mood. Time spent in the natural world and particularly in sunlight triggers an increase in serotonin. Bright morning light can advance our circadian rhythms helping us to sleep better at night and also suppresses melatonin – having an antidepressant effect. Sunlight helps the body produce the immune-boosting Vitamin D, and being outside also helps us breathe more deeply, get more oxygen into our lungs and chase away the stress hormones of adrenaline and cortisol.

Top tips for letting the light in

- Open your curtains and window in the morning even for just a few minutes to let a blast of cold air in.
- Try and work near a window if you can.
- Make sure you have appropriate outdoor clothes – if you're warm and waterproof you're ready for any weather!
- Go outside a few times a day for a few deep breaths of fresh air.
- Take work calls/meetings outside where possible, if there's no reason you can't be walking and talking.
- Take a lunch break and get into the light whatever the weather. It doesn't have to be an hour, or even at lunch time if that doesn't suit your working pattern, but try to get out in daylight hours wherever possible. Having a break outside can make all the difference to your productivity.
- Make a plan to get out every weekend – visit parks, gardens, countryside and beaches. Going outside and being in nature can reduce your anxiety and stress. There is scientific evidence that we feel calmer when we look at trees for example.
- Get a SAD light which replicates daylight and can boost your mood.
- Put fairy lights up, light candles, practice the Danish tradition of hygge at home to get through the long winter months. When darkness is illuminated by a few little flickering lights it seems more bearable.
- Take a Vitamin D supplement. Experts recommend everyone does in winter.

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