

CHANGES MODULE 21:

Seasonal change & mental health



As the weather turns colder and the daylight hours get shorter, you may find your mood or energy levels drop. You might notice changes in your sleeping patterns, eating habits, your concentration or your ability to socialise. For some people the effects can interfere with their daily life and their mental health. The official diagnosis for this is Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), commonly called “winter blues”.

Why does it happen?

Our human ancestors lived most of their lives outdoors. In the winter months there would have been less food so they would have been active during daylight and would have slept more to preserve energy.

Nowadays we spend a lot more time indoors and our working days can start and end in darkness. The problem with this is when we do not receive adequate amounts of natural light in the morning, our bodies can fail to produce the hormones that will help us feel awake. We feel sluggish and low in the daytime then unable to sleep at night.

In short, it can upset our natural rhythm which can start to impact on our wellbeing.

Tips for managing “winter blues”

A) Find the light

Try and catch as much natural sunlight on your face as possible. Get out if you

can, go for a walk (even a brief one in your lunch break can be beneficial). When indoors, sit near windows and make sure your curtains or blinds are fully open. If the sun is shining, let it rest on your face. Make adjustments to your home environment so that it is as light as possible. Removing clutter can help with this as well.

B) Move and eat

It can be harder to exercise when it's cold or dark outside but moving can really help stimulate blood flow and boost mood. Your body may also start craving carbohydrates and sweet things in winter, which can result in sugar lows and weight gain. Try to balance these cravings out with fresh vegetables and fruit. Remember to eat hot meals and drink hot drinks when it's chilly.

C) Enjoy the contrasts

When outside, let the crisp air into your lungs but stay warm. When inside get cosy. You might like to light a

nice-smelling candle and play music, or take a hot shower or bath.

D) Surround yourself with bright colours

In the UK our winter can appear very grey. With less sunshine there are less shadows too which can make the world outside look flat and gloomy. Seek out colours where you can. Appreciate colourful berries, wear bright clothing, or place colourful objects where you will see them. Indoor plants can bring much-needed green into your home.

E) Try light therapy

Some people find using a special lamp for around 30 minutes each morning really effective. Perhaps give one of these a go.

F) Reflect and learn

Winter time can be a good period for thinking, reflecting and learning something new. Use your indoor time to journal your feelings, to learn a new skill or read something you've been meaning to read. Try to see the cold and dark as an opportunity to do this.

Discussion

How do the different seasons affect your mood?

What do you do to look after your mental health in winter?

Further resources

- For a guide to buying a SAD lamp that's right for you, visit: <http://www.sad.org.uk/10-tips-buying-sad-lights/>
- For help with staying warm in winter, see the government's "Keep Warm, Keep Well" leaflet. There are grants to support you in winter-proofing your house. You may be eligible.