

Beating the Winter Blues

By Esther Aardsma

As a chronic depression soldier, I abhor winter in the Midwest. Gray skies, inclement weather, holiday emotional rollercoasters, and frequent viral illnesses combine to make it a very difficult time of year. Are you struggling to lift your mood? Here are my best tips, tried-and-true from the trenches:

1. Start small. It's easy to read a list of tips, set the bar high, fail to meet those self-laid expectations, and crawl back into bed in deeper depression. If you are struggling, set a single small goal that feels doable, such as brushing your teeth. Once that is accomplished, hooray! Write down what you just did, and check it off in bold to maximize your dopamine reward. Now you can set another goal. It's okay to be where you are; there will be other days for the high bar.
2. Capitalize on sunshine when it occurs. A 2023 study of 787 operating room nurses in China by Jie Wang, et. al.,¹ found a positive relationship between sunlight exposure and mental health. Bundle up and go for a walk, go for a drive—or simply open the blinds and sit in the sunshine inside your house if getting out feels like too much. In my personal experience, sunshine has an incredible positive impact on mood—soak it up when it happens!
3. Do a body scan. Take a moment to think about what your body needs. Are your feet cold? Is that lovely sweater you were gifted for Christmas unbearably itchy around the edges? Is your hair greasy? Does your breath taste bad? Often when we let little physical things slide, they increase our depression, which then further decreases our desire to take care of ourselves.
4. Get moving. Improved mood is just one of the ways that exercise benefits the body. A 2006 *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* article by Ashish Sharma, et. al., says “Exercise improves mental health by reducing anxiety, depression, and negative mood and by improving self-esteem and cognitive function. Exercise has also been found to alleviate symptoms such as low self-esteem and social withdrawal.”² Start small, start slow, and don't put expectations on yourself that will result in further feelings of failure (unused

New Year's gym membership, anyone?) Just do something that you are capable of *right now*, even if it's only getting up out of your seat and walking around the house tidying up, or pulling up a one-minute YouTube exercise video. If you are up to it, a local walking group could provide accountability and companionship alongside low-impact exercise.

5. Sleep if you need to. According to the CDC, in 2022, 36.8% of adults in the U.S. were not obtaining sufficient sleep.³ Depression thrives on sleep deprivation. Are you getting the sleep you need? When I find myself staring dully into nothingness, unable to focus, I often function much better after a twenty- to thirty-minute power nap.
6. Play music. A 2013 study by Ayush Agrawal, et. al., demonstrates that our heart rates respond to the beat of the music we listen to.⁴ If we listen to fast-paced music, our heart rates increase, and as a result we will feel more alert, excited, anxious, etc. If we listen to slower music, we will feel more relaxed, sleepy, and romantic. Consider your emotional need when choosing your playlist—my kids beg to clean house to Parry Gripp.
7. Connect. A 2022 scientific literature review by Priya Wickramaratne, et. al., regarding the impact of social connectedness on mental health, states “The majority of studies...showed that...social support was a protective factor for both depressive symptoms and disorders.”⁵ Talk to someone you trust face-to-face, or as close to face-to-face as you can. Don't feel like you can trust anyone? I've been there. Don't give up on connection. If friendship feels impossible, then I highly recommend seeking a good therapist. Talking about what is really going on under the surface with a *single* person can be a lifeline.
8. Help someone. Depression can stem from a sense of purposelessness. Helping others can push us outside of ourselves and give us a sense of direction and purpose. A 2023 study of adolescents by Zhonggui Xin, et. al., concludes that actively helping others “[achieves] self-healing of depression.”⁶
9. Create something. Push yourself to learn something new (YouTube has many tutorials), and make something beautiful. Winter tends to be gray and

colorless. It is a well-known fact that color impacts mood, although experts disagree somewhat on the exact impacts of each color. Work with the colors that feel cheerful to *you*.

10. Accomplish something. Are you holding onto uncompleted projects that you were going to finish “someday?” I have found that I get “highs” from starting a new project and finishing a project...but the middle portion gets tedious and I’m most likely to abandon ship when I’m about halfway through. The in-progress projects awaiting completion speak failure to me—but if I buckle down and do the work, I receive a large sense of accomplishment (endorphins!) that I finished something that was hard for me. Let today be your “someday.”
11. Pay attention to your nutrition. According to a 2023 research review article by Magdalena Zielińska, et. al., depression can be a symptom of many different nutrient deficiencies, including (but not limited to!) Vitamin D, magnesium, zinc, omega-3 fatty acids, calcium, protein, and iron.⁷ Are you getting the balanced diet you need?
12. Talk to your doctor. *If you are having serious thoughts of harming yourself or others, that is an emergency—please seek help immediately.* If a negative headspace is keeping you from enjoying life or functioning in a normal capacity, then it’s time to talk to your doctor. If you are hesitant to bring it up with your doctor, consider whether it might be time to switch to a doctor who will support you better. Build your support team—support fights depression in its own right. It’s worth the effort to gather around you those you can trust.

If you find winter hard like I do, my heart goes out to you. Hang in there. Brighter skies and warmer days are coming soon.

1 Jie Wang et al., “Association Between Sunlight Exposure and Mental Health: Evidence from a Special Population Without Sunlight in Work,” *Risk Management and Healthcare Policy* 16 (2023): 1049–57, <https://doi.org/10.2147/RMHP.S420018>.

² Ashish Sharma et al., “Exercise for Mental Health,” *Primary.Care.Companion.to.the.Journal.of.Clinical.Psychiatry* 8, no. 2 (2006): 106, <https://doi.org/10.4088/pcc.v08n0208a>.

³ CDC, “FastStats: Sleep in Adults,” *Sleep*, January 31, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/data-research/facts-stats/adults-sleep-facts-and-stats.html>.

⁴ Ayush Agrawal et al., “The Effect of Music on Heart Rate,” *Journal.of.Emerging.Investigators*, ahead of print, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.59720/12-012>.

⁵ Priya J. Wickramaratne et al., “Social Connectedness as a Determinant of Mental Health: A Scoping Review,” *PloS.One* 17, no. 10 (2022): e0275004, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0275004>.

⁶ Zhonggui Xin et al., “Analysis of Self-Healing of Depression by Helping Others in Adolescents from the Perspective of Constructivism,” *Frontiers.in.Psychiatry* 14 (August 2023): 1201923, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1201923>.

⁷ Magdalena Zielińska et al., “Dietary Nutrient Deficiencies and Risk of Depression (Review Article 2018–2023),” *Nutrients* 15, no. 11 (2023): 2433, <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu15112433>.