



Winter Blues and Seasonal Low Mood

An explainer and light, movement, and connection planner · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)

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At a glance

- Many Canadians notice lower mood and energy as days get shorter in fall and winter.
- For some, this becomes Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), a form of depression with a seasonal pattern.
- Light, movement, routine, and connection can make a real difference.

Winter blues or SAD?

	Winter blues	Seasonal Affective Disorder
How common	Very common	Less common, but significant
Symptoms	Lower energy, wanting to stay in, mild low mood	Persistent low mood, loss of interest, oversleeping, carb cravings, withdrawal
Impact	Life continues mostly as usual	Affects work, relationships, and daily functioning
What helps	Self-care strategies below	Professional support; options include CBT and light therapy

Why seasons affect mood

Shorter days mean less exposure to daylight, which can disrupt the body's internal clock (circadian rhythm) and affect brain chemicals involved in mood and sleep, such as serotonin and melatonin. Colder weather also tends to reduce activity and social contact, which can lower mood further.

What the research says

Seasonal Affective Disorder was first described as a recurring depression in fall and winter that remits in spring and summer (Rosenthal et al., 1984).

A randomized trial found that CBT tailored for SAD was as effective as light therapy in the short term, and associated with fewer recurrences in following winters (Rohan et al., 2015).

Tool: My Winter Wellness Planner

Area	My plan
Morning light (e.g., outside within an hour of waking, near a window):	
Movement (what, when, with whom):	
Connection (who I'll see or call each week):	
Something to look forward to each week:	
Sleep routine (same wake time):	
Winter activities I enjoy or want to try:	

Weekly mood and energy tracker

Day	Mood (0–10)	Energy (0–10)	Time outdoors	Notes
Mon				
Tue				
Wed				
Thu				
Fri				
Sat				
Sun				

Strategies to try

- **Get outside in daylight.** Even on cloudy days, outdoor light is much brighter than indoor light.
- **Keep moving.** Regular physical activity helps mood. Try walking, skating, or an indoor class.
- **Plan social contact.** Schedule time with people so it doesn't slip away.
- **Ask about light therapy.** A light therapy box may help, but talk with your doctor first, especially if you have eye conditions or bipolar disorder.

- **Embrace the season.** Cozy rituals, winter walks, or seasonal traditions can make winter feel less heavy.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Adopt a winter mindset.** In northern Norway, researchers found people who saw winter as something to enjoy had better wellbeing. Try naming three things you genuinely like about winter.
- **Make a winter bucket list.** Plan small seasonal pleasures: a hot chocolate walk, a skating trip, a cozy movie night.
- **Try a dawn simulator.** An alarm light that gradually brightens before you wake can make dark mornings easier.
- **Practise friluftsliv.** This Norwegian idea of "open-air living" means spending time outside year-round. Dress warmly and make short outdoor time a habit.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

How does my mood usually change through the seasons?

What do I tend to stop doing in winter that I miss?

What brings me warmth and comfort in colder months?

What would make this winter feel different from last year?

When to reach out for support

If low mood lasts more than two weeks, affects daily life, or you notice a seasonal pattern year after year, please talk with your doctor or a therapist. Seasonal depression is very treatable.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

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