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10 Ways to Make the Most of the Shorter Days Ahead

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As the days get shorter and the weather gets chillier, many of us start to develop a serious case of cabin fever. It doesn't help that the COVID-19 pandemic has forced everyone to be more housebound, making us feel like we missed out on the usual summer outings. All of these challenges may seem overwhelming, perhaps even more so now that fall is upon us and winter is right around the corner.

Maintaining your mental and physical well-being can take more effort as it gets harder to venture out into the darkness. Give yourself permission to reset your state of mind to get you through the next few months.

One thing that might help is to remind yourself of the things you're grateful for – for example, the gift of extra time. The luxury of having more hours in your cozy home gives you the opportunity to accomplish things you've always wanted to do but never felt you had the time to try. You can learn new hobbies, start big projects, and reach out to friends you haven't spoken to in a while. Don't forget to incorporate simple routines into your day, too, like spending at least 15 minutes outside to get your daily dose of sunshine.

These are just a few ways to endure the upcoming months in hibernation. Here are 10 other ideas to help you make the most of the darker days ahead.

P.S. Think of the suggestions as a bucket list. What appeals to you may not appeal to others, but it's fun to share ideas with friends. If you don't get to all of them, no worries. Winter will come again.

1. Take a daily stroll in the daylight

Although the frosty temperatures are driving us to stay inside, it's still important to get some fresh air every day. Studies have shown that spending time outdoors, even for a short walk, can elevate your mood, help you focus better, and extend your life expectancy. A few of the specific health benefits include increasing vitamin D levels, improving cardiovascular health, and reducing diabetes. Green spaces also expose your body to micro-organisms, like good bacteria, that boost your immune system and regulate inflammation to keep your cells healthy.

Everybody has their own preference for when they feel like going outside. Try taking walks at different times of the day to find the optimal time for you. Some people prefer a walk before dinnertime to let loose after work while others might prefer a midday walk to break up the day. With clocks falling back an hour, you'll find it easier to wake up in the morning – another great time to sneak in a stroll.

2. Consider light therapy

As daylight saving time comes to an end, it might be hard for your mind and body to adjust to the shorter days. While we can't do anything about the sun, you might consider investing in a light therapy box. It can help combat the effects of seasonal affective disorder (SAD), which is a type of depression that occurs during the fall and winter. Some signs of SAD include a loss of energy, inability to focus, and an insatiable urge to eat unhealthy food. Experts recommend sitting in front of a light therapy box for the first 20 to 30 minutes after you wake up.

No one knows exactly why SAD happens, but researchers speculate that the light can help regulate circadian rhythms, which might mitigate the negative effects of less light on your mental health.

3. Make a fire

A fire not only warms the body but actually energizes the mind, too. Research has shown that fire can alter the brain in a positive way. Whether you have a fireplace, an outdoor fire pit, or even a candle, go ahead and strike that match. Staring into a flame is meditative and can inspire you in all sorts of ways, some of them unexpected. It can help people work out complex problems and improve long-term memory. Archeologists speculate that making a fire and creating the artificial light helped humans evolve because they had more time to think while our ape ancestors went to sleep when darkness fell.

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4. Go stargazing

Have you ever looked into the starry, starry night and been curious about what you're seeing? You don't need a telescope to get a better sense of the bright lights above you. Many objects in the sky are visible to the naked eye. There are impressive apps, like Sky Guide, Stellarium, and Star Walk, that help you identify constellations. They also have a few augmented reality tools that turn the Big Dipper or Orion into constellation art. You can even travel through time and see what the sky looked like in the past or how it will look like in the future. It's like having your own planetarium in the palm of your hand.

It's not just stars that shine bright in the sky. Did you know the International Space Station, or the ISS, is the third brightest object in the sky? NASA's website includes nifty features to track its location and can even send you an alert when it's above your home.

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5. Try a new hobby

While you're spending more time indoors, it might be the perfect opportunity to pick up a hobby, like learning a new instrument. You can find how-to lessons on just about anything online, but in today's connected world, you can find high-quality instructors, like Grammy winners, Broadway alumni, and symphony orchestra members on [Maestro Match](#). The service matches professionals with students for virtual lessons.

What about trying a textile craft? [Knitting](#), [crocheting](#), and [needlepoint](#) tutorials are readily available for beginners to have a go. If those diversions require more dexterity than you might be gifted with, a [latch hook](#) kit could be more suitable. They're simple to use and make for a relaxing project.

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6. Read a book

As darkness descends sooner in the day, why not curl up with a good book? Reading every day has proven benefits, like reducing stress, improving your memory, and inducing a sense of calm and relaxation. If you need a recommendation, you can check out the New York Times' list of best sellers or authors who have won the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes.

If you would rather read with other like-minded people, you can join a book club, either in person or virtually. The Boston Public Library hosts a wide array of book clubs so you can find a group that interests you.

7. Connect with friends

We may be spending more time at home, but that doesn't mean we have to spend less time with friends. Nurturing social connections takes work though, and it will require more effort as the weather gets colder and it's harder to leave the comforts of your cozy home.

There are creative ways to connect with friends such as writing a postcard or playing a virtual Scrabble game. Having healthy friendships actually benefits your physical well-being. A social network increases your sense of belonging, boosts happiness, and can help you live longer by encouraging you to avoid unhealthy habits like excessive drinking.

8. Get nostalgic

Looking back at the past may not always seem useful to the psyche, but experts say that nostalgia can strengthen your psychological well-being, especially in times of loneliness or disconnectedness. When the nights are long, you might take the time to reflect on the past and perhaps remember a fond memory you shared with friends from college or the

time you listened to your grandparent's stories about a bygone era. Recalling the past actually helps embolden your sense of identity, bolster your sense of purpose, and make you more optimistic for the future. Psychologists even have a label for this: "pleasant reminiscing." And now that you're spending more time at home, creating photo books is a gratifying way to organize old photos and round up the year's highlights, honor a loved one, or capture memories of a trip for an armchair travel escape.

RELATED: [10 Nostalgic Activities To Get You Outside and Playing Like a Kid Again](#)

9. Attend performances, virtually or in person

Autumn is usually the start of the performing arts season. Enjoying the arts can be uplifting for the spirit and the mind by decreasing cortisol levels and other stress hormones. Whether you watch a show in person or online, it is important to hold on to your thirst for music or theater because it is good for the soul after all.

If you can't sit inside a theater or symphony hall, you can find a wide array of virtual performances online. This might be the perfect time to fulfill a goal of watching all of Shakespeare's plays, many of which he wrote when the plague shuttered the Old Globe Theatre in London. If the Bard isn't your cup of tea, you can pick out a theater show from anywhere in the world.

If you prefer music, you can catch an online concert from the Boston Symphony Orchestra or pop artists. Studies have shown that music can reduce stress, improve brain function, and boost your mood.

10. Cultivate joy through cooking

It's easy to forget the joy that food can bring when you're cooking three meals a day, each and every day for your family. I have to admit that I'm at the end of my rope, figuring out the meals to make for the people I live with. (Sorry kids, Mom's going on strike!) Coming up with new food inspirations can be a challenge.

You can try a DIY communal meal that's fun for the family, like a Swiss raclette, which entails grilling meat, fish, or veggies on a tabletop grill while sliced cheese melts underneath the grill. The cheese can be added to the food you're grilling, petite potatoes, or baguette slices. You can also do a cheese fondue, Taiwanese hot pot, or Korean BBQ.

If you're looking for baking ideas, expand your repertoire for making food that brings you happiness. If you haven't jumped on the sourdough bread bandwagon, this may be a good time to get on board. If bread isn't comfort food for you, try something sweet like a British version of an apple dessert, inspired by the Great British Bake Off. After all, apple pie did originate from the other side of the pond.

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