

# A WINTER BLUES *survival guide*



@talktoallie

# Welcome!

Every year when I notice the humidity break and temperatures drop, my thoughts shift toward upcoming schedule changes, priorities, and my internal state. While some embrace the change and look forward to the upcoming season of festivities and celebrations, others notice that the change can come with an intense shift in mood and motivation. While the shift in mood usually starts late fall or early winter the symptoms someone experiences can also vary in intensity and severity.

Even though many of us struggle with symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) every year, we often don't make plans to help cope with the onset and severity of symptoms. I made this workbook to help others create a plan to navigate their struggles associated with changing seasons and mental health.



## ABOUT ME

I am a registered Counselling-Therapist based out of Prince Edward Island, Canada. I opened a private practice in 2020 called Connected Therapy and work with adults 18+ with varying concerns. However, the three main areas I work with are anxiety, addiction, and ADHD. For more about my practice please visit [@talktoallie](https://www.instagram.com/talktoallie) on Instagram or [www.connectedtherapy.ca](http://www.connectedtherapy.ca)

## What should I expect to learn from this guide?

By the end of this workbook, you will have a deeper understanding of seasonal mood shifts and a personalized toolkit to manage its effects. Remember, you are not alone in this journey. There are supports available to help shed light on your symptoms and help regain control of your well-being. Here's a list of what to expect in this guide:

- A brief overview of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)
- Explore the seasons and their impact on mood
- Identify your triggers and personal patterns
- Examine lifestyle modifications
- Gain an understanding of how your thoughts can impact your mood
- Create your Winter Wellness Plan



# WHAT IS SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER (SAD)?

SAD is a type of depression that follows a seasonal pattern, typically occurring during the fall and winter months when daylight hours are shorter and natural sunlight is scarce. Many people experience mild changes in mood and energy levels in response to changing seasons, but for some, these shifts can become overwhelming and debilitating. SAD can manifest in various ways, including sadness, hopelessness, irritability, and changes in sleep and appetite patterns.



# SEASONAL CHANGE & IMPACT ON MOOD

Seasonal changes can impact mood primarily due to the interplay of various biological, psychological, and environmental factors. This phenomenon is most commonly associated with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), but it can also affect many to a lesser degree without meeting the criteria for a clinical diagnosis. Here are some key reasons why seasonal changes can influence mood:

- **Biological Clock and Circadian Rhythms:** The human body has an internal biological clock governed by circadian rhythms. These rhythms regulate various bodily functions, including sleep-wake patterns and the release of hormones like melatonin and serotonin. Seasonal shifts in daylight hours can disrupt these rhythms, leading to imbalances that affect mood and energy levels.
- **Sunlight Exposure:** Reduced exposure to natural sunlight, especially during the fall and winter months in regions with shorter days, can lead to decreased production of serotonin—a neurotransmitter associated with mood regulation. Lower serotonin levels are linked to feelings of sadness and depression.
- **Melatonin Production:** Reduced sunlight exposure can also lead to the overproduction of melatonin, a hormone responsible for regulating sleep patterns. Overproduction of melatonin during the day can result in feelings of fatigue and lethargy, contributing to low mood.

# SEASONAL CHANGE & IMPACT ON MOOD

- **Vitamin D Deficiency:** Sunlight is a primary source of vitamin D production in the body. Reduced exposure to sunlight can lead to vitamin D deficiency, which has been linked to depressive symptoms. Vitamin D plays a role in regulating serotonin production and other biochemical processes related to mood.
- **Disruption of Routine:** Seasonal changes can disrupt daily routines and activities. Cold weather and fewer daylight hours may discourage outdoor exercise and social interactions, which are essential for maintaining positive mental health.
- **Psychological Factors:** The anticipation of seasonal changes and the knowledge of the impending shift in weather and daylight can lead to a phenomenon known as "anticipatory SAD." This psychological aspect can contribute to anxiety and low mood before the onset of a particular season.
- **Social and Cultural Factors:** Seasonal holidays, societal expectations, and cultural traditions can add stress or emotional weight during certain seasons, potentially worsening mood disturbances.



# SEASONAL CHANGE & IMPACT ON MOOD

- **Genetic Predisposition:** Some individuals may have a genetic predisposition to SAD or be more susceptible to the effects of seasonal changes on their mood.

It's important to note that not everyone experiences mood disturbances during seasonal changes, and the degree to which someone is affected can vary widely. While SAD is a diagnosable condition that requires treatment, many people may experience milder fluctuations in mood with the changing seasons. Recognizing the potential impact of seasonal changes on mood and implementing strategies for self-care and support can be helpful in managing these effects.

*Did you know?*

Winter blues, often referred to as "winter depression" or "subsyndromal SAD" (Subsyndromal Seasonal Affective Disorder), are milder and more common than full-blown Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). These symptoms typically occur during the fall and winter months and are related to reduced daylight and colder weather. While not as severe as SAD, winter blues can still impact a person's mood and functioning.

# SEASONAL CHANGE & IMPACT ON MOOD

## Common symptoms associated with winter blues:

- **Low Energy Levels:** Feeling consistently tired, fatigued, or having reduced physical and mental energy is a hallmark of winter blues. This can lead to difficulties with motivation and productivity.
- **Increased Appetite:** A noticeable increase in appetite, particularly for carbohydrate-rich or comfort foods, can be a symptom of winter blues.
- **Difficulty Concentrating:** Poor concentration, brain fog, and difficulty focusing on tasks are common during this time. This can impact work and daily responsibilities.
- **Social Withdrawal:** People with winter blues may withdraw from social activities and become more socially isolated, preferring to stay indoors.
- **Irritability:** Increased irritability and moodiness are often reported. This can affect relationships with friends and family.
- **Hypersomnia:** An increased need for sleep, often characterized by oversleeping or difficulty waking up in the morning, is a common symptom.



# SEASONAL CHANGE & IMPACT ON MOOD

- **Reduced Interest in Activities:** A decreased interest in and enjoyment of typically pleasurable activities is another symptom of winter blues.
- **Feelings of Sadness or Mild Depression:** While not as severe as clinical depression, individuals with winter blues may experience feelings of sadness, hopelessness, or general malaise.

It's important to note that winter blues are typically milder and shorter in duration than SAD, a diagnosable mental health condition. Various strategies that we will cover in this guide, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy strategies, and lifestyle adjustments, can be effective in managing and alleviating the symptoms of Winter Blues. If these symptoms persist or significantly impact your daily life, it's advisable to seek professional help. Additionally, it's important to note that this guide is not a substitute for seeking individual therapy.



# IDENTIFYING YOUR TRIGGERS & PERSONAL PATTERNS

Identifying triggers and personal patterns for winter blues is a valuable step in managing and mitigating the impact of this seasonal phenomenon on your mood and well-being. Here's how you can go about it:

- **Keep a Mood Journal:** Start by keeping a mood journal. Note your daily feelings, energy levels, and any noticeable changes in your mood or behavior. This journal will help you track patterns and identify specific triggers.
- **Seasonal Timing:** Pay attention to when your symptoms typically start and when they improve. Winter blues tend to align with the fall and winter months, but the exact timing can vary. Understanding when your symptoms tend to worsen or improve can provide insights into your specific triggers.
- **Environmental Factors:** Take note of changes in your environment. Are there specific weather conditions or changes in daylight hours that coincide with your mood shifts? For example, you might notice that your symptoms worsen on cloudy, dark days.
- **Social and Lifestyle Factors:** Consider how your social and lifestyle habits change with the seasons. Do you engage in fewer outdoor activities or exercise less during the colder months? Are there social events or gatherings that you tend to avoid during this time?

# IDENTIFYING YOUR TRIGGERS & PERSONAL PATTERNS

- **Sleep Patterns:** Monitor your sleep patterns. Do you experience changes in your sleep duration or quality during the winter? Oversleeping or struggling to wake up in the morning can be indicative of winter blues.
- **Social Isolation:** Reflect on your social interactions. Are you more likely to withdraw from social activities and spend more time alone during the winter months? Loneliness and social isolation can exacerbate mood-related symptoms.
- **Stressors and Life Events:** Consider any major stressors or life events that occur during the fall and winter. Personal or work-related stress can contribute to winter blues. Identifying these stressors can help you develop coping strategies.
- **Previous Winter Experiences:** Reflect on past winters and whether you've experienced similar mood changes. Identifying consistent patterns from year to year can be a key indicator.

Once you've identified your triggers and personal patterns for winter blues, you can develop a tailored plan to manage and mitigate these effects. This may involve lifestyle adjustments, the use of light therapy, dietary changes, exercise routines, and engaging in activities that promote well-being during the colder months.

On the next few pages I've included examples of weekly mood trackers - remember self-awareness is key to coping.

# WEEKLY MOOD TRACKER

Week of:



**M**

**T**

**W**

**T**

**F**

**S**

**S**

Notes/ reflections:

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# WEEKLY MOOD TRACKER

Week of:

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DAY	MOOD	WHAT HAPPENED	HOW I RESPONDED
MONDAY			
TUESDAY			
WEDNESDAY			
THURSDAY			
FRIDAY			
SATURDAY			
SUNDAY			

Notes/ reflections:

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# LIFESTYLE MODIFICATIONS

After thoroughly reflecting on how the weather affects your emotional state, it's essential to recognize that while we may not have control over the external climate, we do have agency over our internal climate.

The next step in your journey toward coping with seasonal mood shifts involves discerning what is and isn't within your control and then making strategic changes. In my role as a therapist, I've had the privilege of assisting many clients with navigating their unique concerns with mental health, and Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a subject that requires careful attention. The winter months can bring unique challenges, with shorter days and reduced exposure to natural sunlight significantly affecting emotional well-being. In this guide, I've included insights and practical lifestyle modifications that are important for effective coping.



- **Harnessing the Healing Power of Light:** Light therapy, which involves using specialized lightboxes to emit bright, full-spectrum light, can be a powerful tool in resetting internal clocks and alleviating SAD symptoms.



- **The Great Outdoors as a Natural Healer:** We often underestimate the simple act of spending time outdoors during daylight hours. Nature has a remarkable ability to uplift our spirits and reduce stress.



- **Sleep as a Pillar of Well-Being:** Sleep patterns play a pivotal role in managing SAD. You will learn the importance of maintaining a consistent sleep schedule. Create a bedtime routine that fosters relaxation and enhances sleep quality. The positive impact on mood and energy levels cannot be understated.

# LIFESTYLE MODIFICATIONS



- **Physical Activity and Nourishing Nutrition:** Regular physical exercise is a natural mood enhancer. Additionally, mindful nutrition is key. Discover how a diet rich in mood-boosting foods. Consider reaching out to a dietician to explore what foods might work for you.



- **The Mindful Path to Stress Management:** Mindfulness practices and stress management techniques are invaluable tools in SAD management. Some techniques worth are meditation, deep breathing exercises, or progressive muscle. Having a plan for daily routines can help reduce stress and anxiety, serving as a buffer against seasonal challenges.



- **Nurturing Social Connections:** Isolation can worsen SAD symptoms, so exploring ways to maintain social interactions with friends and loved ones is important. Whether it's through in-person gatherings or virtual meet-ups, connecting with support networks and engaging in social activities can provide vital support.



- **Creating a Comfortable Haven:** The physical environment plays a significant role. Reflect on how to make living spaces warm and inviting, with soft lighting, cozy blankets, and decor that fosters comfort, providing a sanctuary against the winter chill.

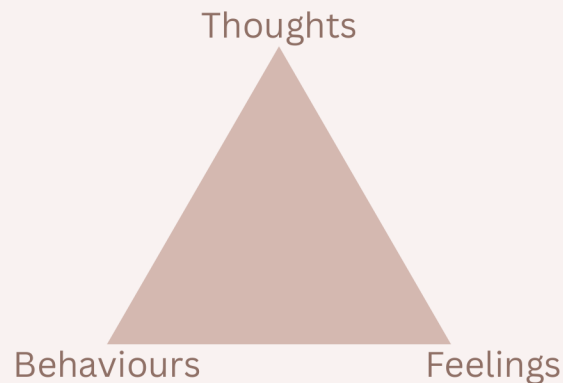


- **Professional Support:** Seeking professional support, such as therapy or counselling, is a crucial step toward emotional well-being. Another option is to consider reaching out to your doctor to discuss whether medication should be added to your treatment plan.





# CHALLENGING THOUGHTS



**In the first part of this guide, we focused on how your behaviours can impact your feelings. Now we will focus on how your thoughts impact your feelings by learning about the cognitive triangle.**

The Cognitive Triangle is a concept used in cognitive psychology and Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) to explain the relationship between our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. In this model, our thoughts influence our feelings, which in turn impacts our behaviours. These behaviours can loop back to affect our thoughts and feelings:

- Thoughts: at one point of the triangle, you have "thoughts." Thoughts represent the cognitive or mental processes that occur within our mind. These thoughts can be conscious or subconscious and can encompass a wide range of beliefs, ideas, interpretations, self-talk, and self-perceptions. They often influence our perception of situations and people.
- Emotions/Feelings: at another point of the triangle, you have "emotions" or "feelings." Emotions are the subjective experiences or states of mind that arise in response to thoughts or external events. They can be both positive (e.g., joy, excitement) and negative (e.g., sadness, anxiety), and they can vary in intensity.
- Behaviours/Actions: the final point of the triangle represents "behaviors" or "actions." Behaviours refer to the actions or reactions that we engage in based on our thoughts and feelings. These actions can include verbal or non-verbal expressions, decisions, and physical activities.

# CHALLENGING THOUGHTS

Our thoughts act as the lenses through which we perceive the world, and this can become especially evident during the darker winter months when they wield a significant influence over the intensity of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) symptoms. Enter "cognitive distortions" — the term used in Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to describe these unhelpful thought patterns. These habitual (and often automatic) thinking patterns distort our perception of reality, often intensifying negative emotions and perpetuating cycles of depression and anxiety.

For instance, believing that winter will inevitably lead to unrelenting despair can foster feelings of hopelessness. By recognizing and challenging these thought patterns, you can reframe your perspective and cultivate a more balanced understanding of your experiences. This can ultimately help with opening the door to more effective coping strategies and improved emotional well-being. CBT therapists often refer to cognitive distortions as "thinking errors" because they lead to inaccurate perceptions of reality, which in turn trigger negative emotional responses and unhelpful behaviours. This set of automatic thinking errors can influence our judgment and decision-making, and CBT experts have identified a common list of these distortions, each representing a specific type of thinking error.





# TYPES OF UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS

## 1. All-or-Nothing Thinking (Black-and-White Thinking):

- Definition: Seeing things in extreme, all-or-nothing terms with no middle ground.
- Example: "If I can't be happy all winter, then there's no point in trying to improve my mood."

## 2. Overgeneralization:

- Definition: Drawing broad, negative conclusions based on limited or isolated experiences.
- Example: "I felt down last winter, so this winter is going to be just as terrible."

## 3. Mental Filtering:

- Definition: Focusing exclusively on negative aspects while ignoring or discounting positive experiences.
- Example: "I had a good time with my friends last week, but it doesn't matter because I'm still feeling so down."

## 4. Catastrophizing:

- Definition: Expecting the worst possible outcome, often exaggerating the potential consequences of a situation.
- Example: "If I can't overcome SAD this year, my life is going to completely fall apart."

## 5. Personalization:

- Definition: Assuming responsibility for events or situations that are beyond one's control.
- Example: "My family is miserable because of my mood; it's all my fault."

# TYPES OF UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS

## 6. Should Statements:

- Definition: Putting pressure on yourself with "shoulds," "musts," and "ought to" statements, leading to feelings of guilt and frustration.
- Example: "I should be able to snap out of this; I must be stronger than this depression."

## 7. Emotional Reasoning:

- Definition: Believing that your emotions reflect objective reality, even when evidence suggests otherwise.
- Example: "I feel so hopeless, so there must be no hope for me to ever feel better."

## 8. Discounting the Positive:

- Definition: Minimizing or ignoring positive experiences and accomplishments.
- Example: "Sure, I felt a little better today, but that's just a fluke. It won't last."

## 9. Labeling and Mislabeled:

- Definition: Using overly negative labels to describe oneself based on specific behaviors or emotions.
- Example: "I'm such a failure because I can't cope during the winter."

## 10. Magnification and Minimization (The Binocular Effect):

- Definition: Exaggerating the importance of negative events and downplaying the significance of positive ones.
- Example: "Missing a day of work due to my symptoms is a disaster, but managing to complete a project is no big deal."

# Thought Challenging Worksheet

This worksheet is a tool to guide you through the process of identifying, examining, and challenging negative thoughts that may be exacerbating your experience of seasonal mood shifts. By breaking down your thoughts and introducing balanced thinking, you can gain a clearer perspective on the challenges presented by the season and cultivate a more constructive mindset. Remember, the goal is not to invalidate your feelings but to explore alternative viewpoints that can alleviate the weight of negative thinking.

## STEP 1: IDENTIFY NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

**What specific situation triggered your negative emotions related to seasonal mood shifts?**

- Example: Recall a recent day when the lack of sunlight made you feel particularly down.

## STEP 2: RECOGNIZE UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS

**Identify automatic negative thoughts. Are there any thinking errors?**

- Example: "I can't enjoy any part of winter because it's always gloomy." (black-and-white-thinking).

### STEP 3: CHALLENGE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

**What evidence supports your negative thoughts about the season?**

- Example: "The weather has been consistently cloudy, and I do tend to feel low on those days."

### STEP 3: CHALLENGE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

**Can you find evidence against your negative thoughts? Are there moments when you've enjoyed winter despite the weather?**

- Example: "Last week, even with the clouds, I had a great time at the winter market with friends."

### STEP 4: REFRAME WITH BALANCED THINKING

**How can you view the situation more realistically?**

- Example: "While the weather can be challenging, there are still enjoyable moments and activities I can engage in."

## STEP 4: REFRAME WITH BALANCED THINKING

**What positive aspects or alternative explanations can you consider?**

- Example: "The winter season provides opportunities for cozy indoor activities and reflection."

## STEP 5: RECORD RESULTING EMOTIONS

**After challenging and reframing your negative thoughts, how have your emotions changed?**

- Example: "I feel a bit less overwhelmed and more open to finding joy in winter activities."



# WINTER WELLNESS PLAN



REFLECTING

## REFLECTING ON SEASONAL CHANGES:

HOW DOES SEASONAL CHANGE IMPACT MY MOOD?

IDENTIFYING TRIGGERS

## IDENTIFYING TRIGGERS AND PATTERNS:

WHAT ARE MY TRIGGERS?

LIFESTYLE

## LIFESTYLE ADJUSTMENTS:

WHAT LIFESTYLE ADJUSTMENTS CAN I MAKE AND HOW WILL I ADJUST MY ROUTINE?

# WINTER WELLNESS PLAN



COGNITIVE

## **COGNITIVE STRATEGIES:**

WHAT NEGATIVE THOUGHT PATTERNS TEND TO EMERGE DURING THE WINTER AND HOW CAN I CHALLENGE THEM?

ASSESSMENT

## **ASSESSMENT:**

I WILL KNOW MY PLAN IS WORKING WHEN...

BARRIERS

## **IDENTIFYING BARRIERS:**

SOMETHINGS THAT COULD INTERFERE WITH MY PLAN ARE...

# WINTER WELLNESS PLAN



ACTION PLAN

## **ACTION PLAN:**

WHAT CAN I DO WHEN SOMETHING IS INTERFERING WITH MY PLAN:

VALUE

## **VALUE:**

THE MOST IMPORTANT REASONS WHY I WANT TO MAKE THESE CHANGES ARE...

SUPPORT

## **MY SUPPORTS:**

HOW CAN OTHER PEOPLE HELP ME? (WHO / TYPE OF SUPPORT).



# WANT TO LEARN MORE?

As the seasons change, it's natural to experience shifts in mood and energy levels. By implementing the strategies outlined in this guide, you can empower yourself to navigate seasonal mood changes with self-awareness. Remember to prioritize self-care, maintain healthy routines, seek social support, and consider professional assistance if you find yourself struggling significantly. Embracing a proactive and mindful approach to managing seasonal mood changes can lead to a more balanced and fulfilling life throughout the year.

If you're looking for more support and would like to see if we can work together, and find a path that works for your unique situation you can send me an email at [allie@connectedtherapy.ca](mailto:allie@connectedtherapy.ca)

Wishing you a journey of self-discovery and emotional well-being as you embark on this seasonal transition.

*With gratitude,  
- Allie*