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Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time



The Weight of Winter and Negative Thoughts

Winter can be a tough time of year for many people to manage. Short days with less sunlight and chilly weather often bring a sense of isolation and sadness, which we usually call the "winter blues." Negative thinking—whether it's self-criticism, ruminating on worst-case scenarios, or simply feeling stuck—can make us feel vulnerable, like we have less control over ourselves. For some, these feelings may even be a sign of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). This condition can cause depression-like symptoms during the colder months, making you feel exhausted, irritable and sad. But the good news is that there are ways to break the cycle of negative thinking, take better care of yourself, and make it through the winter with a brighter outlook.

In this article, we'll help you understand why negative thoughts happen and share some simple strategies to help counteract them, like being mindful and establishing positive daily routines. With more focused awareness, you can reframe your thinking and start to feel better, taking control of your mental health so you can improve your overall well-being.

What is negative thinking, and how does it affect you?

Negative thinking can affect how we perceive reality. When we think negatively, we develop a pattern where we tend to lean

towards the irrational. In turn, our thoughts become overly pessimistic. These thoughts are sometimes referred to as cognitive distortions. Over time, they lower motivation and self-esteem, plus lead to problems with managing stress, anxiety, and depression.¹ Negative thinking can have a significant effect on our mental health, leading to chronic feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.

Some common types of negative thinking include:

- **Self-criticism**, where you're constantly putting yourself down or believing you're not good enough.
- **Worst-case scenarios**, where you see the worst possible outcomes in any situation, even when it's unlikely they will happen.
- **Overgeneralizations**, where you arrive at broad conclusions based on a single event, such as believing you'll never be successful after not doing well on a test.
- **All-or-nothing thinking**, where you view situations between two defined points of view, not allowing for any midpoints or alternatives between them. It can create a situation where you believe you're a complete failure if you don't achieve perfection.

Negative thoughts can trigger overactive trauma responses, where you can get stuck in fight, flight, freeze or fawn.² The fatigue of this kind of thinking pattern can create a cycle of poor mental health or even physical illness. We develop a bias towards negativity, effectively training our brains to focus on negative information as a means of self-protection.³ Instead, we become comfortable with feeling incapable, threatened, or unwilling to take chances, “even in the face of evidence to the contrary.”⁴ Where this “heightened awareness of any sense of a threat to our wellbeing – is a function that served our ancestors well, and played a crucial part in our survival as a species,” in today’s world, this negativity bias often works against us, leaving us stuck in negative patterns.⁵

Understanding the Winter Blues

The “winter blues” describes feelings of sadness or fatigue that many of us experience during the colder months. While it’s common for people to feel a slight dip in their mood when the days get shorter, some experience a more severe condition called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). SAD is a type of depression that recurs each year, usually during the fall and winter. Experiencing SAD, your “ability to function in your daily life” is challenged by persistent sadness, lack of energy, difficulty concentrating, and changes in sleep patterns.⁶

SAD is related to the “lack of sunlight” during winter, which disrupts your body’s internal clock, or circadian rhythms, and leads to changes in the production of critical mood-regulating hormones such as serotonin and melatonin.⁷

- Serotonin, a neurotransmitter that regulates mood, is reduced, which can leave you feeling down.
- Melatonin, a hormone responsible for sleep, increases, making you feel sluggish and tired.

Sunlight exposure, or lack of it, also contributes to disruptions in vitamin D levels. A Finnish study found that when someone is deficient in vitamin D, not only are they more vulnerable to signs of depression, but they can also have higher levels of LDL cholesterol (also known as “bad” cholesterol) and even higher blood pressure.⁸ Other research has linked muscle weakness, infections, type 2 diabetes, dementia and autoimmune diseases such as multiple sclerosis to low levels of vitamin D and darker climates.⁹

While vitamin D supplementation is generally safe, it's important to consult with your doctor and pharmacist to determine if you have low blood levels before taking anything to try to correct them. One thing that can be effective is to get outside and expose ourselves to more daylight to see improvements in mood and sleep quality as “abnormal circadian timing” is corrected.¹⁰

The benefits of overcoming negative thinking

Negative thoughts can feel overwhelming, but breaking free from them can significantly improve your quality of life. When you are trapped in negative thinking patterns, it’s easy to feel that you are not in control and “there is nothing” that can be done to change things.¹¹ Taking the opposite approach and cultivating more positive thoughts helps reduce anxiety and worry, enabling you to “devise a plan of action and ask others for assistance and advice.”¹² You’ll develop a better, more stable mood, feel more resilient, and have a more optimistic outlook. Research also reveals that a person’s ability to fight off disease and experience better physical and emotional health improves when they think more positively.¹³

Shifting your mindset can also improve job performance and relationships, resulting in better overall well-being. When you can approach challenges positively, it is easier to handle stress and setbacks when they happen. But it’s also important to distinguish between positive thinking and toxic positivity. Positive thinking encourages hope and perseverance and recognizes that we experience a full range of emotions as humans. Toxic positivity dismisses negative and painful emotions entirely. It’s unrealistic and can make someone feel “shame in revealing struggle or fear.”¹⁴ What happens is that invalidating real emotional experiences can make people feel worse simply for not being positive enough.

How to break the cycle of negative thinking

Overcoming our tendency to anchor in negative thinking takes time and practice, but many strategies can help.

Mindfulness and awareness

One of the best ways to disrupt negative thoughts is to practice mindfulness. Being present with your thoughts and noticing when negative thoughts arise is a good start. While all thoughts are welcome, you can change your response to negative thinking with greater awareness.

Reframe negative thoughts

You can also reframe negative thoughts to reflect more balanced, positive perspectives and accuracy. This practice is also known as cognitive restructuring. It’s a good technique to help you move away from worst-case scenario thinking and consider more realistic and manageable outcomes and is often used in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

You can use questions to help you determine whether your thinking is “biased or illogical” and leaning towards the negative. Some questions you might ask include:¹⁵

- Is this thought based on emotions or facts?

- What's the worst that could happen? How likely is each possible outcome? How could I respond if the worst happens?
- How does this thought pattern affect the people around you?

Take small, positive actions

No matter how small, actions can help distract your focus away from negativity. Going for a walk, spending time with friends, or enjoying hobbies can help disrupt the negative thinking cycles and shift your mood. Taking action can be quite an effective coping strategy that has a "tremendous effect on your mood" when done consistently.¹⁶

Create a positive winter routine

Establishing a daily routine during the fall and winter can help you avoid the winter blues. It can be as simple as ensuring you experience these three things:

1. Light therapy – whether that means going outside to absorb daily or using a lightbox that mimics natural sunlight, exposing your eyes to daylight can be highly effective.
2. Physical activity – regular exercise releases endorphins that naturally elevate your mood, reduce stress, and improve sleep.
3. Engage in hobbies – spending time doing creative activities such as painting, knitting, or reading can help you relieve stress and give you a sense of purpose.

Tips for emotional self-care during winter

- Set boundaries to protect your mental health and reduce stress. It could mean limiting your exposure to negative media or saying no to commitments that feel overwhelming.
- Keeping a gratitude journal where you write down things you are thankful for can help shift your focus from everything going wrong to what's going right. Consistent practice can have a powerful effect on your thinking.
- Stay connected to people who are important in your life. Friends and family are crucial connections to maintain because they help us feel more emotionally resilient and less lonely. Connecting, whether in person, by phone or through video chats, is worth the effort. When we feel disconnected, we are more vulnerable to developing diseases and experiencing anxiety and depression.


Navigating the winter months with a more positive frame of mind may take time, but it's possible. Remember that small, intentional actions can help you avoid becoming trapped in cycles of negative thinking. When you establish routines and self-care, you can protect your mental health and improve your overall well-being. Focus on making gradual changes, and remember that even small actions can make a big difference in helping you approach winter with resilience and optimism. Your Employee Assistance Program, offered through Homewood Health, provides you with access to counsellors and therapists who can offer solutions and coaching to help you move to more balanced thinking patterns.



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