8 Scientifically-Backed Ways to Beat the Winter Blues

**When your mood is falling as fast as the thermometer, these**

**small lifestyle changes may help boost your spirits.**

**By Brigitt Hauck, Real Simple**

**If you’re starting to feel like nothing but a very full, very strong pot of coffee will get you out of bed, join the club. Holiday bills are high, temperatures are low, and the days are way too short. Here, scientifically proven ways to lift your spirits and ease the mid-winter doldrums.**

**1. Make your environment brighter.**

 When your body is craving more daylight, [sitting next to an artificial light](http://www.realsimple.com/health/mind-mood/light-therapy)—also called a light box—for 30 minutes per day [can be as effective](http://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/seasonal-affective-disorder-bring-on-the-light-201212215663) as antidepressant medication. Opening blinds and curtains, trimming back tree branches, and sitting closer to windows can also help provide an extra dose of sunshine.

**2. Eat smarter.** Certain foods, like [chocolate](http://dujs.dartmouth.edu/fall-2010/you-are-what-you-eat-how-food-affects-your-mood#.VK1_WivF_ew), can help to enhance your mood and relieve anxiety. Other foods, like [candy and carbohydrates](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23500173) provide temporary feelings of euphoria, but could ultimately increase feelings of anxiety and depression.

**3. Simulate dawn.**People with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), a form of depression that usually begins in late fall or early winter and fades as the weather improves, [may feel](http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/basics/symptoms/con-20021047) depressed, irritable, lethargic, and have trouble waking up in the morning—especially when it’s still dark out. [Studies show](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17151164) that a [dawn simulator](http://www.walgreens.com/store/c/philips-light-therapy-wake-up-light%2C-model-hf-3500/60/ID%3Dprod6214611-product?ext=gooHome_Health_Care_Solutions_PLA_Light_Therapy_prod6214611_pla&adtype=pla&kpid=sku6187831&sst=1be5d8d1-3643-a4a9-b3bd-00000de977ba&kpid=sku), a device that causes the lights in your bedroom to gradually brighten over a set period of time, can serve as an antidepressant and make it easier to get out of bed.

**4. Exercise.** A 2005 study from [Harvard University](http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsweek/Exercise-and-Depression-report-excerpt.htm) suggests walking fast for about 35 minutes a day five times a week or 60 minutes a day three times a week improved symptoms of mild to moderate depression. Exercising under bright lights may be even better for seasonal depression: A [preliminary study](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8902007) found that exercise under bright light improved general mental health, social functioning, depressive symptoms, and vitality, while exercise in ordinary light improved vitality only.

**5. Turn on the tunes.** In a [2013 study](http://munews.missouri.edu/news-releases/2013/0514-trying-to-be-happier-works-when-listening-to-upbeat-music-according-to-mu-research/), researchers showed that listening to upbeat or cheery music significantly improved participant’s mood in both the short and long term.

**6.** **Plan a vacation.** Longing for sunnier days at the beach? [Research shows](http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11482-009-9091-9) that the simple act of planning a vacation causes a significant increase in overall happiness.  If a vacation is out of the question, watch a travel or nature show about somewhere you’d like to visit.

**7.** **Help others.** Ladling out soup at the local shelter or [volunteering](http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11482-009-9091-9) your time can improve mental health and life satisfaction.

**8. Get outside.** Talking yourself into taking a walk when the temperatures plummet isn’t easy, but the [benefits are big](http://www.realsimple.com/health/preventative-health/reasons-to-spend-time-outside): Spending time outside (even when it's chilly!) can improve focus, reduce symptoms of SAD, and lower stress levels.