

YOUR GUIDE TO FIGHTING THE WINTER BLUES

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IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR AGAIN! Can you smell it? Gingerbread, cinnamon, mulled wine and dank textbook pages.

Students get the short end of the Christmas cracker. It's a polarizing time. The countdown to Christmas simply marks the countdown to exams. Sleigh bells sound dull through ear muffs of anxiety. Glitter is disorientating to tired eyes. Coffee is easier to swallow than breakfast.

"The technical jargon term for "winter blues" is Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), which just means that people are more likely to feel sad or have low mood at this time of the year, when there's less daylight. This is usually mild and is normal for this time of year, but if it gets bad enough it can become a form of clinical depression, especially when you add multiple stresses from exams, the holidays, and further dysregulation from late night studying." – Robert Elliott, Professor of Counselling at Strathclyde University.

So, we've compiled a **WINTER BLUES GUIDE** to put some colour back in your cheeks this exam time.



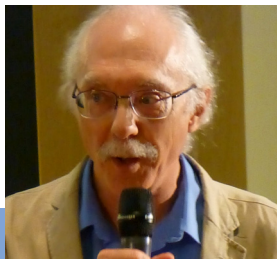
"It is important to know that you are not alone at this time. You will not be the only one struggling with exams or the dark nights in the lead-up to Christmas. It is always good to reach out and connect with another person." – Jennifer Leeder.

BABY IT'S COLD OUTSIDE, BUT GET OUT OF BED

Sleep hygiene is a huge part of productive studying.

Jennifer Leeder advises: "**Keeping work away from the sleeping area is important. Working in a different room would be good or going to the library or another location to study. This keeps the bed (and bedroom) for sleeping – so the association is separate. Work here; relax there.**"

Your brain listens to cues in your environment and reacts accordingly. Although PJs and bed sounds inviting on a cold winters night, you'll struggle to unwind and sleep if your relaxation area doubles as a study.



"I think in our culture we often buy stuff to fill the empty space inside that comes from our lack of connection to other people. In my experience the only thing that can really fill that space is meaningful relationships with other people: friends, family, even work colleagues and fellow students." – Robert Elliott

SHUT YOUR PHONE OFF, SHUT YOUR BRAIN OFF

"Our bodies have many natural rhythms that run on a daily basis and that are strongly affected by daylight. The short days and long nights of winter in Scotland throw these biorhythms off, including our mood," says, Professor Robert Elliott.

A 2013 study in *The Journal of Neuroscience* found that increased exposure to blue light decreases the production of melatonin – a sleep hormone.

Electronic screens emit blue wavelengths, which your brain associates with daylight. Therefore, it's counterproductive to sit on your mobile before bed.

However, per the *Harvard Health Letter*, 2012, blue wavelengths "are beneficial during daylight hours because they boost attention, reaction times, and mood," which is advantageous to exam performance.

Professor Elliott does advise full-spectrum 'light therapy'. This is expensive. So, a study alternative is to decorate your desk with dim blue, snowflake lights or mood lamp.

The *Harvard Health Letter* also states: "Use dim red lights for night lights. Red light has the least power to shift circadian rhythm and suppress melatonin." So, exposure to red light at night can encourage sleep after a long study-day.

#NETFLIXANDPROCRASTINATE

As tempting as it sounds, curling up under your duvet and religiously watching Netflix is not helpful. Take breaks that break up your day, not consume your day.

"If possible, start the day off with some exercise to refresh the brain and energise the body. Putting exercise off until later in the day can often mean it doesn't happen when the pressures of revision take over," suggests Emma Kinrade, Dietitian and Lecturer in Nutrition & Dietetics, Glasgow Caledonian University.

Even if you don't have the time or the money to attend a class, there are plenty of home practices available online for free. YouTube channels like 'Yoga with Adriene' and 'Blogilates' are popular among students.

Still, it's important to "get outside and breathe fresh air," says Emma. "Take a walk. I consider exercise and fresh air to be vital to well-being, especially when sitting for long periods of time studying."

And, no one ever gets by alone. In times of stress, it's a great relief to chat to someone. However, as Professor Elliott warns, "social media is OK but not instead of face to face interaction."

Meet friends for a lunch break; plan an evening out with your family. You have time. Schedule it in. This will act as a reward and help you stick to a study plan.

STUDY PLAYLIST AND HEALTHY SNACKS
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LIFE IS NOT A BOX OF CHOCOLATES

"Diet is important to everybody's mental health, but students at exam time can be especially prone to slipping into bad habits when it comes to diet and lifestyle," says Ms Emma Kinrade.

Tackling the Christmas binge isn't just about keeping the pounds of fat off; it will take some weight off your shoulders, too.

"Try not to fall into the habit of using food to get through the hours of study ahead. Overeating and bingeing is likely to leave a person feeling bloated, uncomfortable and unmotivated to study," Emma advises.

However, some students exhibit the polar opposite response to stress.

"Don't be tempted to miss meals during study time," Ms Kinrade warns, "take a break and invest the time in making quick nutritious meals to keep blood sugar levels stable and prevent dips which can leave you reaching for the chocolate or caffeinated energy drinks." Regarding her stance on caffeine, Emma Kinrade admits: "Coffee is fine as long as it is in moderation. Too much caffeine can lead to insomnia, tremors, headaches and lack of concentration – none of which are conducive to doing well in assessments."



Emma Kinrade – "Try not to stress, keep focused, make a study plan and stick to it. Take regular breaks, get outside and walk and breathe. Merry Christmas!"

PANIC!

If you find yourself in a state of panic, some things you can do are:

- **GROUNDING YOURSELF** in the present moment by putting your feet firmly on the floor, practicing slow, deep breaths, and attending to what you see and hear around you.
- **TALKING TO A FRIEND**
- **TALKING TO YOURSELF IN A FRIENDLY, EMPATHETIC MANNER:** "I know you are scared but this is just a panic attack. It's a thing that can happen when people are under stress, and will soon pass." (Try not to criticise yourself for being anxious; that makes it worse.)
- **CONTACT YOUR GP OR THE STUDENT COUNSELLING SERVICE.** Other possibilities are counselling services in the community, such as the Tom Allan Centre or the Strathclyde Counselling Research Clinic.

