



Slowly does it

When the days are cold and the nights are long, the body's energy can be sapped and there's a temptation to stay indoors, snuggled up with a book. But getting out in nature, even for shorts bursts, can recharge physical reserves and fill the soul with sunshine. Just do it in your own time

In the depths of winter, the idea of seeing friends, visiting a gallery or even heading out for a walk can seem unwelcome prospects for many people. No matter how sociable, cultural or outdoorsy their regular routine, suddenly all they want to do is curl up at home with a good book, a comforting hot chocolate and enjoy the warmth. It's not so surprising. The lack of natural daylight often saps energy and trudging in the rain in full waterproofs isn't for everyone.

The colder, darker season, however, can do more than keep us indoors. For some people, it can also be accompanied by low mood and even bring on symptoms of seasonal affective disorder (SAD). In a study published in *Biological Psychiatry: A Journal of Psychiatric Neuroscience and Therapeutics*, researchers Margaret Austen and George Wilson examined the physiological similarities between the disorder and hibernation, and found people who experience SAD might have what they refer to as 'hibernation-like physiology'.

To some extent, this echoes the teachings of Chinese philosophy, which sees the colder months as a time for storing energy in preparation for spring. In traditional Chinese medicine, each season is connected to yin or yang. Winter is a time when yin is at its height – it's a softer, gentler energy compared with the more lively outwardness of yang. In ancient times, when humans were more connected to nature, the cold snap was a chance to turn inwards and reflect on the passing year, as Jane Alexander discusses in her book, *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Living*. She notes that our ancestors' lives were also more in tune with the rhythm of the seasons.

Modern life, however, doesn't always allow time for the natural inclination to turn inwards. Work, family, friends, responsibilities and, for some, the festivities of Christmas, make it a busier time than ever. And it's often compounded in some societies by New Year pressures to set goals, give up so-called bad habits and bring in sweeping changes. All this when the body and mind would rather slow down and reflect. Turning inwards, however, can feel unsettling and gloomy. Often, many people prefer just prefer to keep busy. But it is possible to navigate a path through winter and adjust to its slower rhythm while also paying attention to your own interests and the inner self. Be kind to yourself and reach out for help if you need it.

Turn the page for suggestions on looking after yourself during the slow season





Deal with negative feelings

Karin Peeters is a life coach, psychotherapist and self-proclaimed 'travel guide to your inner world'. She has the following advice on dealing with the sometimes challenging feelings that can arise in winter: 'Start by being okay with not being okay. Stop beating yourself up for whatever might be going on inside of you. Be kind to yourself and develop an open, curious attitude instead. Whenever a thought or feeling pops up, suspend judgment. Allow it to be. Don't push it away or tell it that it's wrong, nonsense, spoiled or too much. Focus on your breath, the falling and rising of your chest and belly, while the feelings slowly settle down. Breathe unconditional loving kindness to yourself, saying "I wish you happiness".'

Acknowledging and accepting all the feelings that rise up, rather than rushing to change them, is key to being in tune with the season.

Listen to your inner self

Karin recommends creating a safe space to begin listening to your inner self in whatever way feels right to you. Turn off your phone. Get away from social media and the constant input of modern living. 'Gaze into the distance while sitting in your favourite coffee place. Talk to someone who has your happiness at heart. Write. Dance. Draw. Compose music. Take photographs that represent how you feel. Everything is allowed. Let it be a joyous adventure, with plenty of breaks for rest.'

This is a season for the soul, so listen, and embrace whatever expression you feel drawn to.

Wander

It's tricky to align yourself with the seasons if most of your day takes place indoors, often under fluorescent lights. Early starts and late finishes can mean some don't even see natural daylight. Counteract this by spending as much of your free time as possible outside. The light is brightest at midday, so lunchtime strolls can help.

Jini Reddy, author of forthcoming book *Wanderland*, says: 'One way we can embrace the slowing and adjust to the slide into darkness is to redefine our relationship with the Earth. It's worth remembering that we are of the Earth, that we are the human aspect of nature. Earth has its seasons and we are an expression of that.'

To get energy flowing, Jini recommends rising early and going for a walk. Seek out places where you can be close to nature, such as parks or the coast. And try boosting your daylight hours in little ways. Wrap up warm and meditate, or journal, in the garden. Even five minutes a day outdoors in nature can make a difference.



Eat well

Eating locally sourced, seasonal food can help you attune to the natural rhythms of winter. *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Living* author Jane recommends root vegetables and seasonal greens, such as leeks, cauliflower and broccoli – and not reducing calorie intake. Winter triggers biological changes that encourage people to eat more, and it's best to go with nature rather than fight it. Hearty meals are the best way to nourish your body in the colder months. If you're tempted by chocolate and crisps, try to pre-empt cravings by filling up on more nutritious stuff.

Pace yourself

Parties may be hard to avoid, but in the first couple of months of the year, take time to rest and reflect. Isolating yourself isn't always wise, but consider socialising in small groups rather than big crowds. You might want to get friends together to make vision boards of things you'd like to do. This is where you collect pictures and affix them to a board to symbolise any hopes and ambitions for the months and years ahead. You don't have to get out there right away and make them happen. You set the intention and check in every now and then on your progress.

Practise yoga

Eve Menezes Cunningham is a self-care coach, therapist and author of *365 Ways to Feel Better: Self-care Ideas for Embodied Wellbeing*. She recommends the forward fold yoga pose, even if you have only three minutes: 'It's a really effective way to turn your attention inwards, as your body relaxes into the stretch. For a seated forward fold, sit on the floor (or bed) with your legs out straight in front of you. Think about a quality you'd like more of in your life, so that you can inhale this quality and exhale it. Perhaps peace, joy, love or health. Choose something that resonates for you. Raise your arms overhead and reach for the wall in front of you. When you feel ready, lower your hands on to your legs, ankles or around your feet – with practice, you'll get more flexible.'

Yin yoga is also a good fit for this time of year. Finding a local class means you can get out of the house and spend time with others, while still focusing on your internal world.

Seek help where needed

Winter can be hard, especially in cultures where there is less emphasis on community. If you are feeling overwhelmed by feelings of depression or symptoms of SAD then talk to your GP or consider counselling. Living according to your natural rhythm doesn't mean experiencing feelings that make it hard to get through the day.

Words: Kate Orson

