

Tips to fight depression and winter blues

January 6 2010, By Nancy Churnin

You've made it through the thrills and chills of the holiday season. Now you have the bills.

And we're not just talking about the money. We're talking about the deflation and sadness that can be the emotional price of putting off time to reflect as you ricochet from one festive obligation to another.

"February has always been the biggest month for new therapy patients," says Dr. Don Hafer, a neuropsychologist and director of Behavioral Health at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital Dallas. "There's a letdown phenomenon in January. You push, you push, you push all through the holidays. There's a little bit of a high, and then in February you crash."

We can head off the crash by taking stock of our mental health now and making a resolution to stay mentally fit all year long, he says.

Hafer and others agree that you need to take at least as much time for mental health as you do for physical fitness. And while [physical fitness](#) requires activity, what they want to see in mental fitness is stillness.

He recommends that everyone take 15 minutes to quiet the body and focus the mind. He does it himself and says it is every bit as healthful as biofeedback, yoga and meditation.

In fact, for his dissertation, he put one set of people in a room with a [relaxation](#) tape and another in a room with a tape that was blank after a brief introduction. Both groups ended up with similarly lowered blood

pressure.

"I'm known for being this low-key, focused guy," he says. "But I'm completely Type-A, hard-driving, competitive. If I didn't do this, I would not be nearly as productive because I would be spinning my wheels."

Acknowledging that many may struggle to find those 15 minutes, he suggests that quiet time can be combined with another exercise he recommends: journaling. "Don't sit down and write only about the negative stuff -- that makes you more anxious. Most of the journaling needs to be on what's going well in your life and what you have to be thankful for."

Dr. Gary Malone, a psychoanalyst at the Dallas Psychoanalytic Institute and medical director of psychiatry at Baylor All Saints Medical Center at Fort Worth, goes so far as to write prescriptions for his patients to block off a half hour a day simply to be "calm and introspective," he says.

"I often have to do this for women with small kids who get no peace ever," he says. "They take the prescription, show it to their spouse and say, 'I'm going in the backyard. I'll see you in 30 minutes.'"

He admits that when his children were younger, it was hard for him to carve out that time as consistently as he would have liked. But now that they are grown, he is diligent about taking his own prescription daily. He believes it takes that investment of time to learn how to face inner and outer conflicts and find inner peace.

"You have to sit, take a deep breath, relax and think about what your day was like, what's wrong, what's bothering you and what you can change. You don't have to be watching TV or checking your e-mail 24 hours a day. But you do need to resolve the conflicts and resentments that are blocking you from achieving your best life."

Chronic conflict and resentment can also make you more prone to infections and illness, he says.

Even if you seek help from a friend, a spiritual adviser or a trained mental professional to kick-start or help guide the process, he stresses that ultimately the only person who can heal your mind is you.

"You have to remember you're not the passenger. You are at the steering wheel of your life. And the psychological work is ongoing." Finding a balance

Experts we talked to for this story agreed that a mental-fitness routine would begin with spending 15 to 30 minutes a day being calm and introspective. Some tips for staying mentally healthy:

Find a support group: Look for one that focuses on seeking positive solutions or accepts that there are things that can't be fixed. A group that complains together can add to your anger and sense of hopelessness.

Don't abuse drugs and alcohol: Often people try to self-medicate this way, but that makes problems worse.

Be true to yourself: Find people with whom you can be honest and like you for who you are right now and not because of weight you're going to lose or money you're going to make. Don't pretend to be someone you're not.

Exercise, watch your diet and get your sleep: If you exercise 45 minutes a day in your 50s, you drop your chances of dementia by 15 percent in your 70s, Dr. Gary Malone says.

Focus on the positive: Make time for listening to music or reading a book; don't dwell too long on stressful or negative topics.

Socialize and have fun: Inexpensive social activities, such as watching a movie or playing a game with family and friends, taking a walk or organizing a family cookout can keep you and your family healthy.

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