

Spring feelings need to be nurtured in winter

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Anyone who wants to experience those spring feelings in their minds needs to work on them in winter. This is the advice of Siegfried Kasper, Head of the University Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy at the MedUni Vienna, ahead of the forthcoming international "Brain Awareness Week" from the 12th to the 18th of March. Staying active and positive during the winter months too is the key to developing those spring feelings.

It's actually quite difficult for people to develop positive feelings in spring. This is because people tend to spend winter mostly in dark, warm environments - and according to Kasper, this is the worst combination possible. Says Kasper: "If you hang around in dark places and you like being warm, it'll make it much harder for you to get going when spring

comes.” So the expert recommends keeping active in winter too: “Get out into the fresh air – especially when the sun’s shining.”

Light does, after all, play a key role in the preparation of spring [feelings](#). And not just that: the retina of the human eye is one of the brain’s first areas of contact with the outside world. It is where light is registered and directed via the optic nerve straight to the hypothalamus, which is arguably the most important control centre of the autonomic nervous system. Depending on the brightness of the light, various neurotransmitters (such as serotonin) are activated which not only control alertness and tiredness, but also other functions such as temperature, libido, appetite, intestinal activity, glucose metabolism and growth.

Temperature actually plays a secondary role. Cold and sunny weather is also good for the spirit, says Kasper. “Some people are elated in winter, for example, simply when they see an area of snow glistening in the sunlight.” This stimulatory effect is achieved solely through the eye.

More suicides in sunny months

In people who are depressed, this mechanism does not function as it should. Quite the opposite. “Depressed people are unable to feel empathy with happy people and become even more prone to suicide. Health people, on the other hand, say things like “Here comes the sun, I’m going to energise my mind and body.” People with depression can’t do this. Their drive may increase, but their mood is unable to keep pace. Says Kasper: “That’s the paradox. Depressive people ask themselves why they feel worse in spring.”

A study at the MedUni Vienna, published by Benjamin Vyssoki and colleagues, has shown that suicide rates in the sunny months from March to May are higher than between November and January. This is mainly

due to the fact, says Kasper, that the batteries of depressed, inactive people have become drained over the [winter](#), causing them to start the spring without any energy whatsoever. “Once the batteries are flat, it’s impossible to restart the system.”

Light and “love” therapy There is an outpatient clinic for people with seasonal affective disorder at the MedUni Vienna at Vienna General Hospital. Around 200 [people](#) are treated there a year – and their treatment also includes light therapy. Says Kasper: “80 per cent of German-speaking hospitals use this form of therapy. It’s also by far the most cost-effective form of treatment there is.” Intact social or romantic relationships also have a positive effect. Says Kasper: “The partner functions as a kind of light source. Losing your partner for whatever reason and withdrawing to a dark, warm place is the worst possible combination for mental wellbeing.”

Provided by Medical University of Vienna

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