

How to Stay Productive During The Winter



Feeling sluggish, finding it hard to get out of bed and just generally not yourself lately? It's not you—there's literally something in the air. Some 41% of U.S. adults said their stress increases between November and January, according to research from the American Psychological Association. So with the colder nights and shorter days this time of year, how can you stay productive during the winter?

The Truth about Seasonal Affective Disorder

Sometimes known as SAD, seasonal affective disorder is a form of depression affecting 5% of Americans for about 40% of the year, particularly during the fall and winter. Everyone can experience seasonal affective disorder but it's more common in women and people living further north who experience less sunlight during winter.

Symptoms include mood swings, feelings of hopelessness, changes in appetite and sleep, physical symptoms like headaches, stomach aches or fatigue and difficulty concentrating or decision making, which can lead to a decline in productivity and performance at work.

While the exact cause of SAD isn't fully understood, it's often linked to the reduced sunlight exposure we experience during the winter months. This lack of light can throw several systems off balance by disrupting the hypothalamus – the part of our brain that regulates our heart rate, body temperature, appetite and the sleep-wake cycle. It may lead to an overproduction of melatonin, the hormone responsible for sleepiness, and a drop in serotonin, the hormone influencing mood, appetite, and sleep – both of which play key roles in mood regulation.

Having less sunlight during the shorter days in winter can also impact your internal biological clock and circadian rhythm, which relies on sunlight to trigger when it's time to go to bed and wake up.

How the Winter Affects Your Work Productivity

Now that the clocks have changed, you might find yourself walking out of the office to pitch darkness which can feel disorienting and depressing, and makes it hard to wake up the next morning. January is thought to be the least productive month of the year. So what's the link between winter and how well you work?

Even a one hour shift can disrupt our internal clocks, taking days or even weeks for our bodies to adjust. With daylight playing a crucial role in regulating our circadian rhythm, this also directly

impacts our focus, mood, energy levels and sleep quality – all of which contribute to how we perform at work.

Plus, exposure to daylight provides a boost of serotonin which can elevate your mood and help you feel calm and focused. Without enough sunlight, our serotonin levels can dip, putting us at a higher risk of SAD. Morning sunlight in particular can boost our alertness as it suppresses melatonin, which helps us feel more awake and ready to take on work tasks.

A study found that exposure to nature and sunlight is linked with job satisfaction and organizational commitment, plus less stress and depression. Another study by Cornell University found that employees working in offices with optimized daylight experienced 63% fewer headaches, 56% less drowsiness and 51% reduced eye strain, all of which contribute to increased work productivity. When daylight is scarce, these benefits are diminished, which can negatively impact work performance and overall mood.

How to Stay Productive During The Winter Months

The end of the year brings short days and long nights, but it's also an opportunity to reflect on the year, celebrate your successes and set goals or intentions for the year ahead. To counteract the impacts of seasonal affective disorder and winter blues more generally, here are top five tips to keep your productivity going strong throughout the winter.

Soak Up the Sun: Get as much natural sunlight as possible – even a brief walk at lunchtime can be extremely beneficial. When you're indoors, sit near windows. Consider trying a SAD lamp (also known as a happy lamp or light therapy lamp) to keep a regular sleep schedule.

Meditate: Research shows that 2 weeks of meditation can reduce symptoms of depression. Try a simple breathing exercise or moment of quiet during the day or before bed.

Get Moving: The cold and dark winter weather makes it tempting to skip the gym, so instead try an at-home workout like a 20-minute yoga session in your living room. Joining a workout class has added benefits of building community and avoiding isolation. Any movement is good movement.

Keep It In Perspective: Winter can be a particularly rough time with the stress, social pressures and added financial strain of the holiday season. So offer yourself compassion and protect your time and energy where you need to. Remember, the winter months will eventually pass – consider planning something to look forward to when it's over.

Seek Help: If you're struggling to cope with your SAD symptoms, it's important to seek the help of a professional. Talking treatments such as counseling, psychotherapy or cognitive behavioral therapy can help you manage your symptoms.

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