



How to make this winter not totally suck, according to psychologists

This one idea may help you conquer the dread of pandemic winter.

By Sigal Samuel Oct 14, 2020, 11:00am EDT

I'm going to go out on a limb and say you're probably dreading this winter. We know it's going to be harder to socialize outdoors as the weather gets colder. We also know there's probably going to be a surge in new Covid-19 infections. Many of us are feeling anxious about how we're going to make it through the lonely, bleak months ahead.

I see a lot of people trying to cope with this anxiety by drumming up one-off solutions. Buy a fire pit! Better yet, buy a whole house! Those may be perfectly fine ideas, as far as they go — but I'd like to suggest a more effective way to think about reducing your suffering and increasing your happiness this winter.

Instead of thinking about the myriad negative feelings you want to avoid and the myriad things you can buy or do in service of that, think about a single organizing principle that is highly effective at generating positive feelings across the board: Shift your focus outward.

"Studies show that anything we can do to direct our attention off of ourselves and onto other people or other things is usually productive and makes us happier," said Sonja Lyubomirsky, a psychology professor at the University of California Riverside and author of *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*. "A lot of life's problems are caused by too much self-focus and self-absorption, and we often focus too much on the negatives about ourselves."

Rather than fixating on our inner worlds and woes, we can strive to promote what some psychologists call "small self." Virginia Sturm, who directs the Clinical Affective Neuroscience lab at the University of California San Francisco, defines this as "a healthy sense of proportion between your own self and the bigger picture of the world around you."

This easy-to-remember principle is like an emotional Swiss Army knife: Open it up and you'll find a bunch of different practices that research shows can cut through mental distress. They're useful anytime, and might be especially helpful during the difficult winter ahead (though they're certainly no panacea for broader problems like mass unemployment or a failed national pandemic response).

The practices involve cultivating different states — social connectedness, a clear purpose, inspiration — but all have one thing in common: They get you to focus on something outside yourself.

A sense of social connectedness

Some of the practices are about cultivating a sense of social connectedness. Decades of psychology research have taught us that this is a key to happiness.

In fact, Lyubomirsky said, "I think it is the key to happiness."

That's what Harvard's Study of Adult Development discovered by following the lives of hundreds of people over 80 years, from the time they were teenagers all the way into their 90s. The massive longitudinal study revealed that the people who ended up happiest were the ones who really leaned into good relationships with family, friends, and community. Close relationships were better predictors of long and pleasant lives than money, IQ, or fame.

Psychiatrist George Vaillant, who led the study from 1972 to 2004, summed it up like so: "The key to healthy aging is relationships, relationships, relationships."

Other studies have found evidence that social connections boost not only our mental health but also our physical health, helping to combat everything from memory loss to fatal heart attacks.

During our pandemic winter, you can socialize in person by, yes, gathering around a fire pit or maybe doubling your bubble. But there are other ways to make you feel you're connected to others in a wider web. A great option is to perform an act of kindness — like donating to charity, or volunteering to read to a child or an older person online.

"I do a lot of research on kindness, and it turns out people who help others end up feeling more connected and become happier," Lyubomirsky told me.

Lyubomirsky's research shows that committing any type of kind act can make you happier, though you should choose something that fits your personality (for example, if you don't like kids, then reading to them might not be for you). You may also want to vary what you do, because once you get used to doing something, you start taking it for granted and don't

get as much of a boost from it. By contrast, people who vary their kind acts show an increase in happiness immediately afterward and up to one month later. So you might call to check up on a lonely friend one day, deliver groceries to an older neighbor the next day, and make a donation the day after that.

A sense of purpose

Other practices are about cultivating a sense of purpose. Psychologists have found that having a clear purpose is one of the most effective ways to cope with isolation.

Steve Cole, a researcher at the University of California Los Angeles, studies interventions designed to help people cope with loneliness. He's found that the ones that work tend to focus not on decreasing loneliness, but on increasing people's sense of purpose. Recalling one pilot program that paired isolated older people with elementary school kids whom they're asked to tutor and look out for, Cole told Vox, "Secretly, this is an intervention for the older people."

Philosophers have long noted the fortifying effects of a clear sense of purpose. "Nietzsche said if you find purpose in your suffering, you can tolerate all the pain that comes with it," Jack Fong, a sociologist who researches solitude at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, told me. "It's when people don't see a purpose in their suffering that they freak out."

Experienced solitaires confirm this. Billy Barr, who's been living alone in an abandoned mining shack high up in the Rocky Mountains for almost 50 years, says we should all keep track of something. In his case, it's the environment. How high is the snow today? What animals appeared this month? For decades, he's been tracking the answers to these questions, and his records have actually influenced climate change science.

Now, he suggests that people get through the pandemic by participating in a citizen science project such as CoCoRaHS, which tracks rainfall.

"I would definitely recommend people doing that," he told WAMU. "You get a little rain gauge, put it outside, and you're part of a network where there's thousands of other people doing the same thing as you, the same time of the day as you're doing it." (Notice, again, that this is really about sensing you're part of the larger world around you.)

Other citizen science projects are looking for laypeople to classify wild animals caught on camera or predict the spread of Covid-19.

If citizen science isn't your jam, find something else that gives you a sense of purpose, whether it's writing that novel you've been kicking around for years, signing up to volunteer with a mutual aid group, or whatever else.

A sense of inspiration

Finally, some practices are about cultivating a sense of inspiration — which can take the form of gratitude, curiosity, or awe.

Regularly feeling gratitude helps protect us from stress and depression.

“When you feel grateful, your mind turns its attention to what is perhaps the greatest source of resilience for most humans: other humans,” David DeSteno, a psychology professor at Northeastern University and the author of *Emotional Success*, told me. “By reminding you that you're not alone — that others have contributed to your well-being — it reduces stress.”

So one thing you can do this winter is try gratitude journaling. This simple practice — jotting down things you're grateful for once or twice a week — has gained popularity over the past few years. But studies show there are more and less effective ways to do it. Researchers say it's better to write in detail about one particular thing, really savoring it, than to dash off a superficial list of things. They recommend that you try to focus on people you're grateful to, because that's more impactful than focusing on things, and that you focus on events that surprised you, because they generally elicit stronger feelings of thankfulness.

Another practice is to write a letter of gratitude to someone. Research shows it significantly increases your levels of gratitude, even if you never actually send the letter. And the effects on the brain can last for months. In one study, subjects who participated in gratitude letter writing expressed more thankfulness and showed more activity in their pregenual anterior cingulate cortex — an area involved in predicting the outcomes of our actions — three months later.

Feeling a sense of curiosity or awe about the world around you is likewise shown to boost emotional well-being.

“Awe makes us feel like our problems are very trivial in the big scheme of things,” Lyubomirsky said. “The idea that you are this tiny speck in the universe gives you this bigger-picture perspective, which is really helpful when you're too self-focused over your problems.”

For example, a study recently published in the journal *Emotion* investigated the effects of “awe walks.” Over a period of eight weeks, 60 participants took weekly 15-minute walks outdoors. Those who were encouraged to seek out moments of awe during their walks ended up showing more of the “small self” mindset, greater increases in daily positive

emotions, and greater decreases in daily distress over time, compared to a control group who walked without being primed to seek out awe.

“What we show here is that a very simple intervention — essentially a reminder to occasionally shift our energy and attention outward instead of inward — can lead to significant improvements in emotional wellbeing,” said Sturm, the lead author.

So, bottom line: When the world between your two ears is as bleak as the howling winter outside, shifting your attention outward can be powerfully beneficial for your mental health. And hey, even in the dead of winter, a 15-minute awe walk outdoors is probably something you can do.

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