

FIGHTING THE WINTER BLUES?

Do you winter well, or struggle through the interminable greyness and chilling temperatures? I am not alone in finding the end of the summer psychologically challenging.

We may find ourselves planning treats for the children for Bonfire night or Halloween, hardly noticing that we distract ourselves from the inevitable. We are subliminally aware of the six or seven months of a very different life-style enveloping our lives as we momentarily enjoy the crisper air on visits to the park and riversides in west London. Choosing some new pieces for our winter wardrobe and seeing ourselves in darker fabrics, with a splash of brightening red or purple, we struggle to see ourselves as chic in monochrome outfits rather than edging towards the drab and downbeat.

We all have strategies for holding out on the darker side of life, and, melancholy is a part of life. So we look forward to entertaining ourselves during the winter months. At the Orange Tree, the new season of plays is launching with excellent directors like Auriol Smith. Amongst the revivals of plays that are showing during Autumn there could well be a small gem here. Some people become engrossed with *Strictly Come Dancing*, but taking this a step further, this could be the time to try a new activity for yourself, particularly the mood-enhancing activities that involve movement, energy-expenditure and sport. These activities are well-known to increase a sense of well-being by releasing endorphins in the brain. Joining a dance class for a couple also has the benefit of finding

a new routine to provide quality time away from the children. Richmond never did revive its skating-rink but the amazing setting of the rink at Hampton Court is worth a visit even if just to watch others doing the work.

You may find that you are feeling far less energetic and contented than you would like, even that something could be wrong, a subclinical depression, ie, below the threshold of real mental illness. There are some exciting new developments that can help you boost your mood and performance, mentally, physically and emotionally without risking the side-effects of medical drugs, many of which, for depression, are seeking to increase the level of the “happy” neurotransmitter, serotonin. Expert nutritionist, Patrick Holford, advocates a package that can help keep you away from the GP, which also includes

exercise, exposure to natural light and psychotherapy, all elements that work together or one of which may prove essential for the individual.

Holford has written a book called “Food is Better Medicine than Drugs” through which you can explore alternatives that are safe and just as effective, as he explains. The basis of this is understanding that serotonin, and noradrenalin for motivation, and their receptors in the brain, can be kept at a healthy level through understanding the

building blocks that enhance their activity and is found in protein foods or supplements.

Depression occurs when the negative memories of life are exerting an effect via unconscious associations which can trigger long past anxieties and painful events. The key to better adaptation to shadow times in life is *creating new, joyful, or at least enjoyable memories*. When we are healthy, psychologically speaking, we are strong enough in our ego to do this automatically but, when we already feel low, we can forget how to do this or feel that the situation is hopeless.

Existential philosophers encourage us to think of the individual as both cause and effect, to see that we may be the sum of the choices we make. While that can be daunting as it imposes the responsibility of living firmly in our own hands, it should mean that anti-depressant medication

is only ever a temporary solution. Symptoms of feeling low should be addressed; you may need encouragement to make some important decisions, either from a professional, or from family and friends.

The moderate type of “feeling under the weather” or having “the winter blues” is under our control if we look outwards to find inspiration for changing our thoughts, which in turn, change our emotions. It may seem just too small to have a positive effect, but joining a group to meet new people, a book group or meditation group, may be just the catalyst that is needed. This is strengthening, especially as we *take a step towards owning our freedom and responsibility we will feel differently about our selves*.

Anne Cussins, Psychoanalytic therapy.