

How to Survive Blue Monday

The third Monday in January has in recent years become known as Blue Monday. With Christmas out of the way and the consequent belt-tightening, minimal hours of daylight, cold weather and New Year's resolutions wearing off it is no surprise that many of us struggle through the day.

The celebrations are over and the reality of day-to-day life hits us once again. The day was named by psychologist Cliff Arnall in 2005. He claimed he had come up with a formula that would pinpoint the most 'depressing' day of the year. He took into account weather conditions, debt, amount of time since Christmas and how we all hate Mondays and concluded that the third Monday in January provided the perfect mix of conditions that lead to low mood, and depressive feelings. There have since been questions raised about how scientific his formula is and whether such factors really contribute to depression, given that clinical depression often has complex causes and can be very debilitating, but that aside it provides an opportunity to reflect on the challenges that January can bring and how we can better cope with low moods or signs of depression.

In this helpsheet we will explore some of those factors that contribute to Blue Monday and offer our thoughts on how to get through. Indeed they may also be useful for all those other days when you would rather stay in bed than face the day.

If there is anything in this helpsheet that you would like to discuss further you can speak to one of our experienced advisors on the Assistance Line.



We've got you.

Lack of Daylight

It is becoming more widely recognised that the short hours of daylight can have an impact on our mood and general wellbeing. Research from the University of Southampton found that at least 90% of adults experience subtle changes in moods, energy and sleep when the seasons change. In its most severe form this has become known as SAD – Seasonal Affective Disorder – and this is thought to affect about 7% of the population.

Others may experience milder symptoms and what is described as ‘winter blues’. Although the exact causes of SAD and ‘winter blues’ are not fully understood it is thought that sunlight affects some of the brain’s chemicals and hormones, including those that affect mood, appetite and sleep. Most of our vitamin D intake comes from exposure to sunlight and so during the winter months when we have minimal daylight hours we may be a greater risk of vitamin D deficiency. People with darker skin need longer sun exposure in order for their bodies to produce vitamin D. This essential vitamin supports healthy bones and has been linked with low moods.

If you recognise that you have a pattern of feeling more flat, less motivated and low on days with poor light there are some steps you can take which can help:

- Ensure that you get outside every day for at least 20 minutes
- Some studies have shown that light therapy or light boxes can be effective in treating the symptoms. This involves sitting in front of or beneath a light box that produces a very bright light. You can discuss this with your GP or there are a number of models available for purchase from commercial retailers.
- If your symptoms are severe your GP may recommend talking therapies or anti-depressants to help you to manage.
- Ensure you are getting enough vitamin D. Food such as eggs, meat and oily fish such as salmon, mackerel and sardines all contain vitamin D. If you are concerned that you might be deficient talk to your GP, or take a vitamin D supplement.

Am I just feeling low or am I depressed?

Some of the criticism of Blue Monday is that it undermines the seriousness of clinical depression. The word ‘depression’ is bandied about so much these days that it can be confusing to work out whether you are experiencing depression or are simply feeling a bit low.

Sometimes feeling sad, angry or upset is an appropriate response to circumstances in our life and some reflection and positive support is all we need to get by. Friends and family can play an important role in helping us through these times.

Actual clinical depression can be a persistent and overwhelming struggle and involve a range of symptoms. These are just some of the things you might experience if you are depressed:

- Continuous low mood or sadness
- Feeling hopeless and helpless
- Low self esteem

- Feeling tearful, guilt-ridden, irritable or intolerant of others
- No motivation or interest in things, lack of energy or lack of interest in sex
- Difficulty making decisions, poor concentration
- Unable to experience enjoyment Persistent anxiousness or worry
- Thoughts of self harm and / or suicidal thoughts
- Change in weight
- Unexplained aches and pains
- Disturbed sleep
- Struggling with everyday activities such as work
- A wish to withdraw

If you are concerned that you might be depressed you can discuss your symptoms with your GP who will be able to suggest ways of treating it.

You can also do a quick self-assessment on the NHS website, or speak to one of the Assistance Line Advisors.

Debt

With Christmas celebrations out of the way many people find themselves paying for it in January. Of course the best way to avoid post-Christmas debt is to plan for spending in advance and spread the costs, but if you found yourself borrowing in order to finance the festivities there are some positive steps you can take to pay off the bills:

- Switching to a 0% balance transfer deal can be a good way to reduce debt as all of your monthly payments go towards paying off the outstanding balance, thus allowing you to reduce the debt without having to pay interest on top.
- If you are juggling a mixture of store cards and credit cards you could consider consolidating your debts into one loan with a competitive rate. It can reduce the overall monthly payment amount and make it easier to budget as you pay off a fixed monthly amount.

- Seek some debt advice. You can discuss your personal debt concerns by contacting the Assistance Line and asking to speak with an experienced debt advisor. You can find out about potential solutions such as IVA's (Individual Voluntary Agreements) between you and your creditors, debt management plans and basic budgeting advice so that you can decide what works best for you and your particular circumstances.

“ In the depth of winter I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer.”
Albert Camus

Time Since Christmas

Cliff Arnall included the time since Christmas as one of the factors contributing to Blue Monday. It encompasses the comedown that we experience as we realise the fun is over for another year. It is no surprise then that January is the most popular time to book a holiday. With celebrations out of the way we need something else to look forward to. Think of what will bring happiness to you and plan for it, whether it is a hobby you have longed to do, reconnecting with old friends or that dream trip away. Don't forget the small pleasures too, spending quality time with loved ones, going to see a movie or a winter stroll through beautiful scenery.

“ Monday is great if I can spend it in bed.”
Arthur Darvill

New Year's Resolutions

It is estimated that 92% of us fail to keep our New Year's resolutions so if you have already given in you are not alone. There are many reasons why we might fail to keep them. Often we make too many resolutions or they are too complicated. Rather than setting up a momentous challenge at the start of the year you may find it easier to make small, attainable goals throughout the year. If you want to make changes in your life keep your goals simple and avoid ones that are too vague e.g. rather than saying you are going to lose weight why not say you are going to cut out desserts and crisps for two months instead. Rather than saying you are going to join a gym decide which classes you will go to and on what days. After two months, or a set period of time, you can then review how you are

doing and decide whether you want to set another goal or are happy with the changes that you made.

Psychologist Lynn Bufka says 'Remember, it is not the extent of the change that matters, but rather the act of recognising that lifestyle change is important and working towards it, one step at a time.'

Many of us blame our lack of will power for failing to keep resolutions. However studies have shown that our levels of willpower can change.

Essentially you have as much will power as you think you have. Even if you have not met your goals previously you can start afresh with new levels of determination and succeed.

Finally

There is something about the darker, cooler winter days that invite us to turn inwards, to embrace a form of hibernation until the warmer days. This makes it a good opportunity to pause and take stock, to reflect on what may not be working in our lives and think about what changes are needed to make it into the kind of life we want.

Further Resources

Moneysupermarket for comparing financial products such as credit cards and loans –

www.moneysupermarket.com

NHS depression self-assessment –

www.nhs.uk/Tools/Pages/depression.aspx

Mind, the mental health charity –

www.mind.org.uk

Further help and information

Hospitality Action

www.hospitalityaction.wellonline.co.uk

UK 0808 802 2111

IRL 1800 911 121

24-hour Assistance Line providing emotional and practical support.

We've got you.

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