

Lighten Up

How to outrun the blues during the season of plunging temps and zero motivation **BY JAYME OTTO**

HELLO, SUNSHINE

Exposure to natural light can improve mood and the desire to exercise.



IT MAY HAVE started in early November, when clocks fell back, daylight diminished, and the snooze button began to beckon more than the roads. Or maybe during the season of nonstop parties, houseguests, and indigestion, which gave your routine a holiday hangover you're still struggling to shake. Even for normally cheerful runners, the winter blues are common when temperatures drop and you get less exposure to the sun. Although this gloomy state of mind is less severe than seasonal affective disorder (SAD), which is a clinical mood disorder, it can still throw you—and your running—into a funk, says John Martinez, M.D., a San Diego-based sports medicine physician and member of USA Triathlon's medical staff.

Fortunately, research shows that one of the best remedies is exercise. You can literally outrun seasonal blahs. But when you're feeling low, it's hard to get yourself psyched to do much of anything—let alone lace up. Here's how to find the motivation to hit the roads (or treadmill) and resist the urge to hibernate until spring.

SUPPLEMENT YOUR SUN

Vitamin D, made by the skin when exposed to sunlight, is more than just a vitamin. It acts like a hormone, which means it affects every tissue in the body, Dr. Martinez says. Vitamin D deficiency may cause run-thwarting depression and fatigue, as well as diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and osteoporosis. Based on new research, many health experts now recommend up to 2,000 IU of vitamin D daily, which presents a challenge in the winter. "You'll produce up to 20,000 IU of vitamin D by being in the sun between

Exercising for about 35 minutes a day five times a week or for 60 minutes a day three times a week helps to relieve mild to moderate depression.

FEEL BETTER

APPAREL- SHIRT AND SHOES: ASICS; PANTS: PEARL IZUMI

Are You Really SAD?

IF YOU CAN ANSWER YES to three or more of these questions for the same season every year, you may be exhibiting signs of fall or winter seasonal affective disorder (SAD) and should consult your doctor. Talk or light therapy are common treatments.

1 Even though you've scaled back your mileage and aren't burning as many calories, are you craving carbohydrates, especially sweets, like crazy?

YES NO

2 Do you feel like you could sleep all day even though you're getting a full eight hours at night?

YES NO

3 Does your head feel a bit fuzzy? Are you struggling to concentrate?

YES NO

4 The holidays were great, the family is great, work is great. Even so, do you feel bummed out?

YES NO

5 Typically you like running with others, but lately have you been making up excuses to not meet up with your friends?

YES NO

the hours of 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. in the summer," Dr. Martinez says. "But in the winter, leaving for work and returning home in the dark means no vitamin D." Getting outside during your lunch break—even for just a 10- to 15-minute walk—helps. But in places like Boston, Salt Lake City, or Seattle, exposure to solar ultraviolet rays isn't strong enough in winter to fuel vitamin D production in skin. And diet won't do it, either, Dr. Martinez says. You'll only get about 100 IU from a glass of fortified milk and 1,300 IU from a piece of salmon. To help ward off the depression and fatigue, pop one 2,000 IU vitamin D pill daily in the winter.

BILL STEVENSON/AURORA PHOTOS

GO FOR 20 MINUTES

When you run, you feel good, and you keep at it. When you don't run, you feel bad, and it becomes more difficult to start back up again. The cause behind this phenomenon is simple brain chemistry, says Shawn Talbott, Ph.D., a nutritional biochemist who has completed more than 100 marathons and triathlons. When we're stressed from missing runs, our cortisol levels increase. Elevated levels of this hormone cause a domino effect in the body, reducing testosterone and interfering with brain neurotransmitter function, resulting in decreased motivation, fatigue, anxiety, and depression. Luckily, running acts as a natural de-stressor, clearing excess cortisol, bringing testosterone levels back to normal, and rebalancing norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin in the brain. Talbott's studies have shown a 20 to 30 percent increase in vigor, a measure of mood, energy, and mental focus, in people who exercise. "Barring the need for physical recovery, it's those times you feel the least like running that you should run," he says. "And the best way to get back into the routine is to start running again, even if you have to take your workouts indoors or you run/walk just 20 minutes. Your mood will improve, sometimes drastically, as will your motivation to do more."

REFRAME YOUR TRAINING

There are more contingencies to deal with when running in the winter. In order to avoid missing workouts, Sharon Chirban, Ph.D., a Boston-based sports psychologist, recommends having a Plan B. You're usually a morning runner, but the predawn thermometer is stuck at zero—be willing to run in the afternoon instead. If the street is an ice rink, head to the gym and hit the treadmill. "The key to maintaining a winter routine is mental flexibility," she says. "It's essential to have the ability to reframe your workout in order to avoid ditching it." That quitting action is what's most detrimental because it fosters negative self-attribution, which can manifest as *I'm getting fat; I'm lazy* or *I'm falling out of shape; I'm not in control*, Chir-



WINTER WONDERLAND

The changes of the season can be refreshing if you learn to embrace them.

ban says. That becomes a vicious cycle. "Once you're hooked into that negative self-talk, you lose steam and motivation." Chirban recommends coming up with a lighthearted winter goal, like participating in a Chilly Cheeks or Frozen Foot-themed fun run that keeps you excited about training but takes the focus off speed and time.

FIND YOUR WINTER RHYTHM

The seasons have a biological rhythm, so the way you run in the winter will not be the same way you run in the spring, Chirban says. "Letting ourselves back off in winter can be restoring." There is a value in slowing down, as well as in recovery. Substitute a yoga class for one of your weekly runs, or cut back your mileage and spend that extra time strengthening weak spots. There's also a benefit to embracing what makes winter unique. Immerse yourself in the season—gearing up for a run in the cold, taking on a man-versus-nature mentality can be exciting and rejuvenating, Chirban says. Or switch things up. "When you hike or snowshoe a snow-covered trail that you usually run, it brings about a fresh perspective," she says. "If you can find a way to work with winter, not against it, in your training, you're setting yourself up for a powerful start to the spring running season." ❧