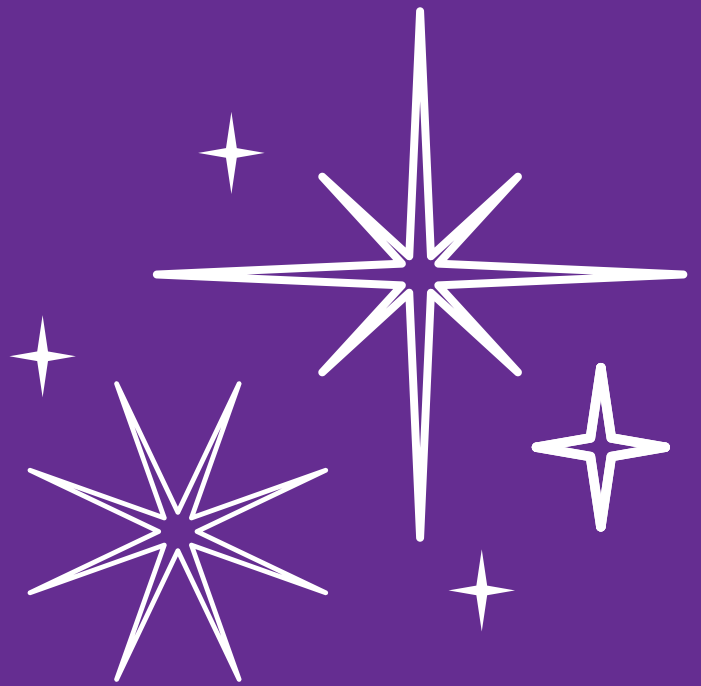


Festive Season Survival Guide



Festive Season Survival Guide

For some of us, the festive season is hard at the best of times. Social isolation, money worries, family dynamics, difficult memories, and, of course, the shorter days and long dark nights: there are many reasons why people can find this period particularly hard. Throw COVID in the mix too, and this winter can feel like a perfect (snow) storm. This leaflet is a guide to getting through the holiday season, and maybe even finding some positive meaning in it for yourself.

Why do some of us find this time of year so tough? Medical research suggests that there are a wide range of mood difficulties which can be triggered during the winter months. Whilst increased life pressures undoubtedly play a role, there is also evidence that decreased sunlight in the winter months can cause chemical changes in the brain and body. These include changes in **serotonin**, a chemical which plays a role in regulating mood, and **melatonin**, a chemical which primarily affects sleep. Symptoms can include low mood, decreased energy, increased tiredness, increased hunger, weight gain, irritability and feeling unsociable. For some people, these symptoms interfere with daily life so much that they need to seek professional help. This diagnosis is called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). Whether you have a diagnosed condition, or you recognise a less dramatic change at this time of year, there are things you can do to help.

This leaflet provides our **Four-step Guide to Winter Survival**. It explains how the season can affect us and gives you some tips for looking after your mental health in winter. It also includes examples of how people around the world find meaning and wellbeing at this time of year, and suggests some ideas for activities to promote wellbeing which you can do in your own home, even during lockdown. There are some examples of traditions and tasks throughout this booklet which might get you thinking of meaningful activities you could do this winter.

Many people who struggle with mood during the winter months find 'Activity Scheduling' helpful. This involves identifying an activity which you find meaningful (something which makes you feel inspired, satisfied or energised), and scheduling set times in the week for this. Often, people will use a timetable or visual planner for this, which helps because you can track your progress and see patterns in activity across time. As you become more confident, you can increase the number of activities of this type you schedule across the week: but it's important to start small because it will take your body some time to adjust to any new changes in activity level.

There is also an Activity Schedule at the back of this booklet which will help you begin your Activity Scheduling journey.

1. Do Not Hibernate

Your body clock and your mental health are intricately linked. Controlled by a tiny, almond sized, part in the centre of the brain called the suprachiasmatic nucleus, your body clock gives you clues about when to sleep and when to wake up, when to eat, when to be alert, and many other bodily cycles. For most of the year, sunlight keeps our body clock working to time. However, as the days shorten over the festive period, our body clocks can struggle to maintain their usual rhythm. This can lead to us feeling less energetic, feeling the need to sleep and eat more, and ultimately struggling to keep up our usual daily levels of overall activity.

The problem with reducing our daily activity level is that we miss out on opportunities to experience pleasure, to gain a sense of meaning from our day, to feel a sense of belonging with those around us, and to feel fulfilled. This lack of positive experiences can in itself lead to feelings of lethargy, which many of us feel as physical tiredness. In this way it can be easy to fall into a negative spiral of decreasing activity and increasingly low mood.

Thankfully, it is possible to break this cycle through some simple (although not always easy!) changes in our everyday lives.

We can support our body clocks by consciously setting ourselves some simple routines. This may be as simple as setting an alarm which gets you up at the same time each morning or planning for three regular meals in a day. These daily routines mark the passage of time, enabling our body clock to re-establish some sense of rhythm and therefore helping us to feel more energetic and motivated.

Whilst establishing routines and planning for meaningful activity may sound simple, it is anything but easy. This is because our body clocks are powerful, and feelings of lethargy and low mood are very real. It is important to be kind to ourselves as we make changes of this type – there will be days when things don't go to plan. This is to be expected and is a normal part of the process. Any small change you can make will make a difference, and over time setting routine and scheduling activity can result in large improvements in mood.

Ursul: Romania

This New Year's Day tradition involves dancing in bear costumes in order to drive away evil spirits and prepare the soil for planting in the warmer months.



Night of the radishes: Mexico

On the 23rd of December the city of Oaxaca in Mexico celebrate by carving radishes into traditional Christmas shapes and competing to find the best scene.



Four-Step Guide to Winter Survival

Here is our four-step guide to festive season survival:

1.

Do Not Hibernate

2.

Look for the Light

3.

Look After Your Body

4.

Seek Support

2. Look for the Light

Make Your Own Fragrant Winter Pot-Pourri

Bring the outside in to your home by creating your own pot-pourri which includes found objects from your local area.

INGREDIENTS:

Pine needles (these can be taken from your Christmas tree or found in your local area)

Orange

Spices: cloves, star anise and cinnamon sticks are all favourites

Found objects from nature: pinecones, large seed pods, holly, ivy, etc.

(NB: take care when handling these items and keep out of reach of children since some elements may be poisonous if ingested)

INSTRUCTIONS:

Slice orange into slices ¼ inch thick with the rind still on.

Place on oven tray at 225 degrees. Check oranges every 45mins and leave in the oven until nicely browned and completely cooked through.

Combine the found objects with the cooked orange slices and spices. Place in a small dish and enjoy the lovely natural smell!



Yule: Celtic origin

This pre-Christmas celebration in northern Europe included lighting a large oak log, which is believed to draw the sun back to the earth. This is where the idea for our chocolate yule log cakes originated.



Sunlight is vital for our physical and mental health. The naturally occurring chemical **melatonin** is released by the brain when it is dark, and this signals our body clock to get ready for sleep. It also instructs our bodies to reduce bodily functions which take place during our waking hours, including how alert and energetic we are. This partly explains why we can find ourselves more lethargic and tired in winter since we are likely to produce far more melatonin during these darker months.

For those of us who struggle with energy and motivation during the festive season, light may play a key part in our wellbeing. Any increase in light will reduce your melatonin levels, but sunlight is by far the most effective means to help us feel alert in the day and sleep well at night.

You can increase your access to sunlight by taking steps to allow natural light into your home such as drawing all curtains, sitting near a window during daylight hours, by going outside more often in the day, or in some cases by using a light box. Light boxes remain a controversial treatment for mood issues, and not all light boxes are the same. For this reason, it is important to seek professional advice before using a light box.

3. Look After Your Body

Lucia celebrations: Sweden

Celebrated on Dec 13th. Traditionally, winter solstice night has been seen as full of supernatural happenings. Lucia is a woman who brings light in a time of darkness. She is represented by young women in white who wear crowns of candles



Yalda: Iran

This solstice tradition, meaning 'birth', lasts all solstice night and includes poetry, storytelling and eating food from the summer months, including watermelon. It is believed that eating produce from the summer will protect the body during the winter.



The link between physical and mental wellbeing is powerful, and perhaps no time is this more obvious than during the winter months. Ever felt 'under the weather', both physically and mentally at the same time? This may be more common than we realise. Research has shown that people who experience low mood have a somewhat lowered immune response, meaning that when you are feeling low you are in fact more likely to also develop common illnesses such as colds and the winter flu. Similarly, the body's response to these illnesses includes symptoms which overlap with low mood, such as lethargy, poor concentration, social withdrawal, and changes in sleeping patterns and appetite. The link between the body and brain's response to both physical health and mood issues may stem from increased inflammation caused by both kinds of health difficulty. However, this is very complex and is still currently under investigation.

What we do know, though, is that maintaining your physical health is a crucial part of self-care when we feel low. In the winter months this often includes maintaining a healthy diet, full of all the vitamins and minerals we need to fight off infections, allowing for enough good quality sleep to help reinvigorate the body, and maintaining our hygiene routines which reduce our contact with pathogens. Exercise too is important, causing a release of mood boosting chemicals into the brain called **endorphins**, and there is early evidence that exercise may help to reduce some of the inflammation seen in people who have low mood.

It is easy to let our self-care slide under the pressure of the festive season. But reminding ourselves of the impact on both our physical and mental health can help.

Delicious Potato Latke Recipe

These fried potato cakes are traditionally eaten during the Jewish winter festival of Chanuka. These indulgent treats, a little bit like a hash brown or a potato rosti, are intentionally oily as a reminder of the oil used to fuel lights in the ancient temple. They remind us of the importance of keeping a light burning even at the darkest of times.



INGREDIENTS:

- 5 large potatoes, peeled
- 1 large onion
- 3 eggs
- 1/3 cup flour
- 1 tsp. salt
- ¼ tsp. pepper
- ¾ cup oil for frying

INSTRUCTIONS:

Grate the potatoes and onion on the fine side of a grater, or in a food processor, or in a blender with a little water.

Strain the grated potatoes and onion through a colander, pressing out as much excess water as you can.

Add eggs, flour, and seasoning. Mix well to form a batter (it should not be too wet).

Heat ½ cup oil in a ten-inch skillet or other large flat pan.

Lower the heat and place 1 large tablespoon of the batter at a time into hot sizzling oil and fry on one side for approximately 5 minutes until golden brown.

Turn over and fry on the other side for 2 to 3 minutes.

Remove your latke from the pan and place it on paper towels to drain excess oil.

Continue with the remaining batter until it is all used up, adding more oil when necessary.

Serve with applesauce on the side and enjoy a winter treat!

4. Seek Support

This booklet is a good place to start if you are feeling low during the festive season, and it may compliment other support provided by professionals. However, for some people Activity Planning, increased exposure to sunlight, and well-maintained self-care are only the beginning of a journey towards wellness at this time of year. It is important to seek professional support if you find yourself continuing to struggle over a prolonged period (for example, two weeks or more), or if you have feelings of extreme hopelessness or thoughts of wanting to harm yourself.

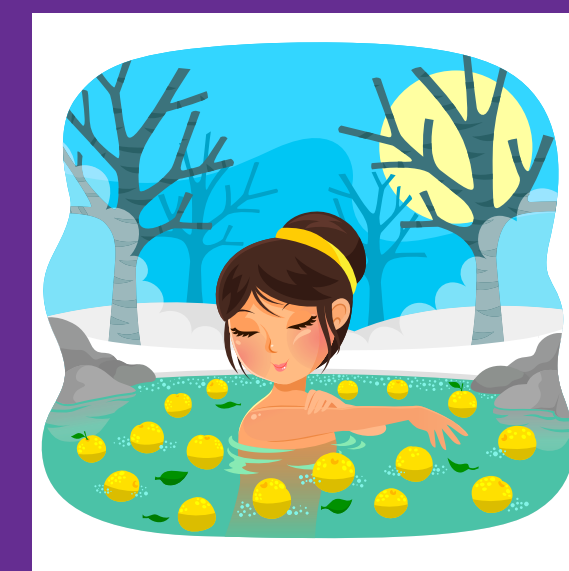
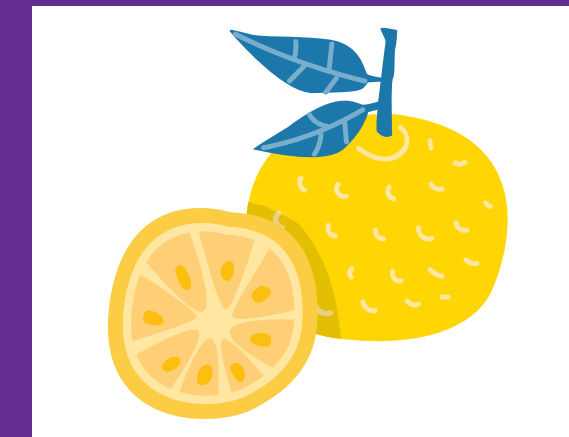
There is a range of support available. The current best practice recommendations are for Cognitive Behavioural Therapy – a form of talking therapy which involves identifying the links between thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and medicines such as anti-depressants which help to regulate the chemicals released by the brain. In South Tyneside you can either visit your GP or self-refer for talking therapies through the South Tyneside Lifecycle Mental Health Primary Care Service.

Call: 0191 283 2937 / Email: stpcmhs@stft.nhs.uk
It is common to have to wait some time for NHS treatments. If you feel in crisis and in need of immediate attention you can call the local Initial Response Treatment (Crisis) Team on 0303 123 1145, call 999 or visit A&E. Whilst waiting for NHS services, there are a range of voluntary and community sector organisation which can help.

You can find a full list of local services at: <https://www.southtyneside.gov.uk/article/57972/Mental-health> and a selection of national services at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-health-helplines/>

Toji: Japan

In Japan, many people mark the winter solstice by soaking in hot baths with yuzu (a type of citrus fruit), believing that this protects them from catching a winter cold. This tradition has spread to zoo animals in the region, some of whom are also treated to yuzu baths.



Activity Scheduling Worksheet

	Day:	Day:	Day:
Morning Activity			
What?			
Where?			
When?			
Who?			
Mood Before			
Mood After			
Afternoon Activity			
What?			
Where?			
When?			
Who?			
Mood Before			
Mood After			
Evening			
What?			
Where?			
When?			
Who?			
Mood Before			
Mood After			

Create Your Own Star Light

In India, colourful paper stars are a common sight over the festive season. They are hung up to mark Divali, the Hindu festival of lights which takes place around October-November, and then left up to celebrate the Christmas star all the way through to the end of December.

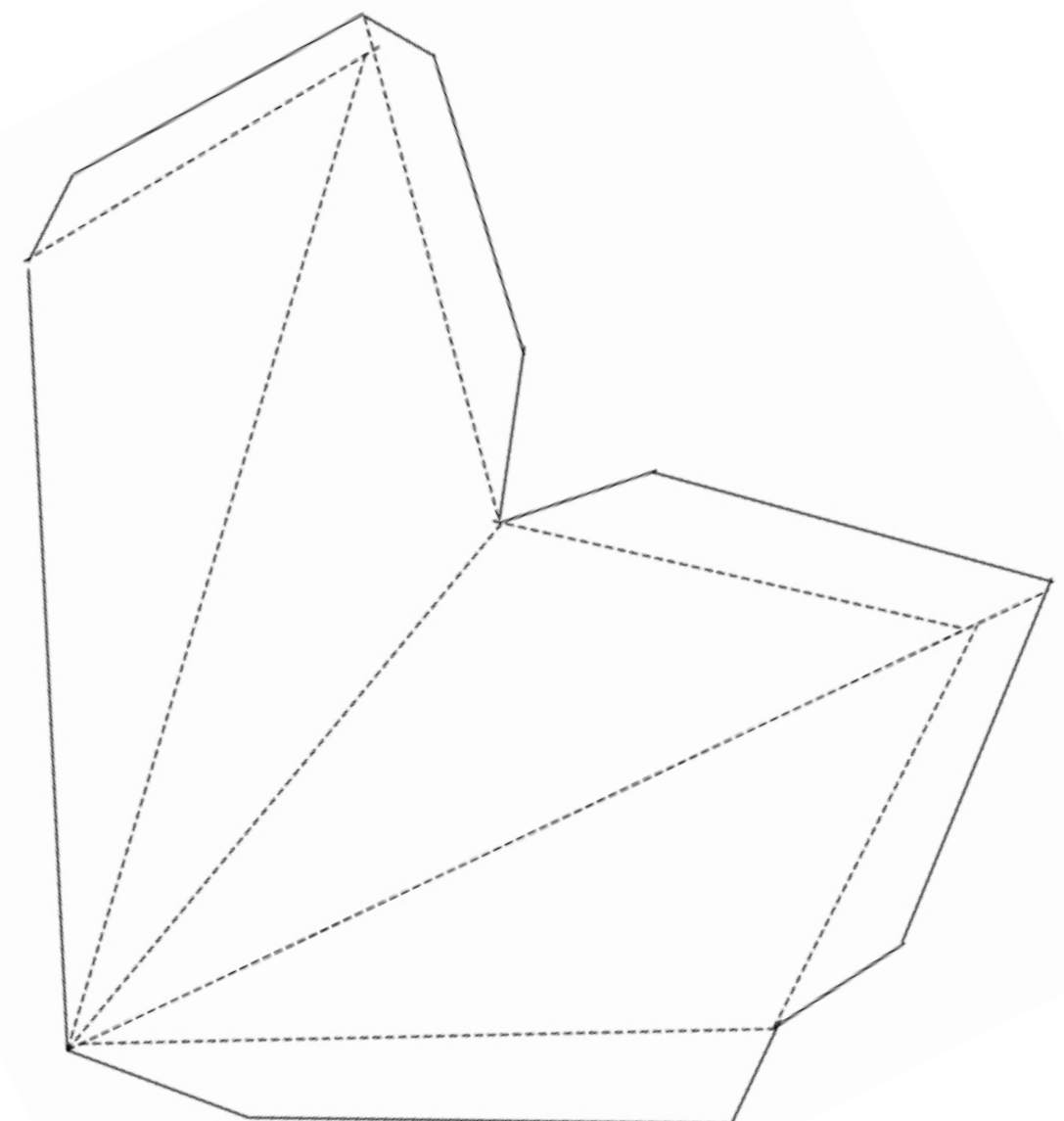


You will need: card, scissors, hole punch, glue, double-sided tape or a stapler, decorations, and thread or coloured ribbon.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Photocopy the template below on to some card. You will need five cards to make one star. Cut out each shape, adding some decoration (glitter, paint, stickers, whatever you like!). With a hole punch, create a number of holes in each 'arm' of the star to let the light through.

Fold along every dotted line and draw the sides together to make each section. For this, use glue, double-sided tape or a stapler. Finally, join together the five sections. This can be fiddly, but it will be lovely when it's ready!



Notes Use this space to make notes of things you liked in the booklet, and ideas you might like to try in the future!

Even Better exists to level out the playing field by providing **mental health and wellbeing support** to members of our community.

www.evenbetter.org.uk