

The Most Depressing Day of the Year Looms. Are You Ready?

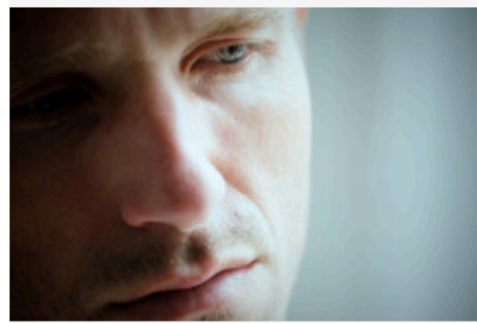
It's called Blue Monday, and it packs a punch, but you can fight back with a little preparation.

The Monday of the last full week in January is dubbed Blue Monday, or the Most Depressing Day of the Year. Why? Short days, cold weather in most places, broken resolutions, and the extra pounds and higher bills that accompany post-holiday letdown combine to make people feel especially low on Blue Monday, some researchers say. This year, Blue Monday hits on January 23.

"No research formally targets Blue Monday as a target date for depression," observes Michael Brodsky, M.D., a psychiatrist and medical director of Bridges to Recovery, a residential treatment center in Bel Air. "But certainly the period after the holidays poses a high risk of blues or depression."

Before you make up your mind to stay under the covers on Blue Monday, here are some hints you can follow between now and January 23 to beat the blues:

1. Don't go it alone. Dr. Brodsky advises spending time with family and friends to counteract the bereft feelings many people experience in January. "Nothing makes winter isolation worse than being alone," he says.
2. Go easy on yourself. If you made ambitious New Year's resolutions to quit smoking, drop the number on the scale significantly, or clean up your finances, good for you. But if you've already had a smoke, snuck in a few cupcakes, skipped the gym, or stashed the credit card bill, don't give up. Break down your original big resolution into smaller, more realistic steps. A refashioned resolution with more achievable goals can help you avoid feeling depressed, overwhelmed, or certain to fail. For example, exchange "get out of debt" for "pay X amount every month" to reduce what you owe. Celebrate each accomplishment, no matter how modest.
3. Curb the cocktails. Alcohol interferes with mood and disrupts sleep, and often deepens feelings of depression.



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4. Make yourself a blue-plate special to banish the blues. Pile it high with foods that can help lift your mood. Salmon, tuna, or other fatty fish provide omega-3s, which may boost your brain's ability to transmit the feel-good chemical, serotonin. The fish also delivers vitamin D – vitamin D deficiency is associated with an increased likelihood of depression, according to a 2010 study in the Archives of Internal Medicine. These findings were reinforced by a new, larger study conducted at UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas and published in Mayo Clinic Proceedings in November. Try tryptophan-rich turkey to help your brain produce serotonin and melatonin, which is needed for sleep. And the lean protein helps you to feel alert and less fatigued. Bring on the spinach, asparagus, and broccoli for extra folate. Low folate levels are linked to symptoms of depression.
5. Lift depression with exercise. Feeling blue can dampen your motivation to exercise, creating a vicious circle of inertia and increased depression. But here's the good news: even light activity helps. If the idea of running or other vigorous exercise makes you feel like you want to lie down, take a 10- or 15-minute walk. Have a friend join you for companionship and to shift your focus. In a population study of more than 40,000 people, Norwegian researchers found that light activity — defined as anything not leading to being sweaty or out of breath — was associated with significantly less depressive symptoms.
6. Get help if you need it. It's important to be evaluated for depression if you are having trouble functioning, says Jeffrey Litzinger, M.D., a psychiatrist who practices in Los Alamitos. Red flags include being late for work, missing work, and comments from friends and family that that you seem depressed. Marked changes in appetite, weight, or sleep patterns may also signal something more than the temporary blues. "Having a family member who has a history of treatment for depression is another indicator that you should seek help," Dr. Litzinger says. He also notes that a pattern of depression every year after the holidays may warrant an evaluation for seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, which are episodes of depression that occur at a certain time of year, usually in winter.