CAREERS CLINIC

What can I do to beat the January blues?

The start of a new year can often be a difficult time, and this year it could be harder than ever. Abi Rimmer asks how doctors can help themselves cope.

“Many of us will be greeting the new year exhausted and weary, and the January blues can be an additional challenge to maintaining our wellbeing. These five small steps can make a big difference.

“Firstly, embrace the blues (and the green). Spending time near water and in nature has positive impacts on mental and physical health. If you can't get outdoors, just looking at a picture of nature can help. “The benefits of physical activity on body and mind are well known, so why not become part of a nationwide community and set yourself the challenge to 'get active every day to beat the blues away' with redtogether.co.uk.

“My third tip is to play. Harnessing creativity and spending time in play improves our reserves. Ask yourself what you used to enjoy doing as a child just for the sake of it and how you can reconnect with that now.

“Look forward and back. One of the best pieces of advice I was ever given was to always have something in the diary to look forward to. Conversely, recalling happy memories elicits positive feelings and can improve wellbeing. Dig out those old pictures and reminisce about happy moments in the past.

“Finally, if things feel overwhelming or difficult please know you are not alone. NHS Practitioner Health (www.practitionerhealth.nhs.uk) is here to care for you. Our service offers free, confidential mental health and addiction treatment and support to all doctors and dentists in England.”

“Beating the blues is such a personal thing, whatever time of year they come. There are some things that help most of us though, such as keeping a lid on the booze, getting some exercise, and spending time with people we like. I wanted to share a few additional things that I've found helpful.

“Have a plan. Every year I write down on paper what I want to achieve and what I want to see happen and put it in my filing cabinet. When I’m frustrated, I get it out and it helps me refocus.

“Drop out of at least one virtual meeting a week (blame bad wi-fi) and go for a walk before midday if possible, or use a light lamp.

“The next key element is light. Get out into natural daylight for a few minutes in the morning and it helps me refocus.

“The good news? All those things that help with mood at other times will help with the blues. However, this year could be harder than ever. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, we haven't had as much social interaction with our loved ones and friends over the Christmas period. All that lovely socialising would usually top us up and leave us grateful for a little down time come January. But this year, as the long nights continue, you may find yourself feeling more tired and jaded than usual.

“The last element is movement. We tend to move less when it's cold and dark outside, so building some more movement into our day-to-day life in the winter months will make a big difference.

“Try googling ‘deskercise’ or ‘desk yoga’ if you’re working from home, or put on your favourite song and dance about the house if you're working from home, or put on your favourite song and dance about the house once a day. Whatever you do, make it easy and enjoyable—life is too short to do stuff you don’t love.”

Cite this as: BMJ 2021;372:m4932