

## Winter and our discontent: Experts offer tips to cope with seasonal stresses

by Kate Goldsmith

Picture the scene: Your back is aching from digging out after Mother Nature's latest snowy tirade, or your wallet is aching from having to pay someone else to do the job. The whole family's climbing the walls; ice dams are making the roof leak; and you've just shelled out another small fortune to heat your home, sweet home.

Throughout the region at supermarkets and post offices, around kitchen tables and water coolers, the conversation is pretty much the same these days: We're sick and tired of winter.

Complaining about the cold and snow isn't unusual for Hudson Valley residents, but this year the volume is cranked up as we experience one of the more extreme winters in recent memory. Underlying the griping, moreover, is a malaise compounded by the issues

that accompany prolonged inclement weather. The risk of injury or property damage due to ice or snow, having to make arrangements for childcare on snow days, navigating vehicles under hazardous driving conditions and financing unplanned expenses are very real, valid concerns that elevate stress levels.

"The added responsibilities and problems definitely have an impact on individuals," said Jacki Brownstein, executive director of Mental Health America of Dutchess County. "Not being able to get out in the sun and do your usual routine is [also] more stressful."

Brownstein was among a handful of professionals this writer contacted last week for tips on coping with the "winter blues." These folks are all glass-half-full types—the ones who take lemons and make lemonade, or lemon slushies in this case. Their advice reflected three basic tenets: Look at the bright side; enjoy the simple things; and be proactive wherever possible.

The tendency in winter is to stay inside, Brownstein said; but going outdoors, even for a little while, could be

beneficial.

"I'm a big believer of getting some sun when you can," she said.

May Mamiya, director of case management at Vassar Brothers Medical Center, asked some of her colleagues what they do to cope in cold weather. A few said they were inspired by the views of the Hudson River from Waryas Park on the Poughkeepsie waterfront. Recently, said Mamiya, they saw two eagles in flight in that area—a relatively rare treat.

"One of the recurrent themes was [appreciating the region's] extraordinary natural beauty," she said.

Physical activity was another popular mood-booster for the group, said Mamiya. A cross-country skier spoke of the many opportunities she's had to enjoy her sport this year.

"You've just got to find some way to move," said Mamiya, a proponent of "the powerfully therapeutic effect of exercise."

"Put on your favorite music and start dancing," said Adrienne London, a licensed clinical social worker at Vassar Brothers Medical Center.

Finding a worthy distraction also helps to lift one's spirits.

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"One of my colleagues took in a stray cat, a casualty of the storm," said Mamiya.

Daydreaming can be put to good use, as well. Guided imagery is a mind-over-matter technique used by London and other social workers in Mamiya's department to help reduce stress in individuals recovering from surgery or undergoing chemotherapy or radiation therapy.

"The whole process of taking your mind to a different place, when winter's feeling really confining, is useful," Mamiya said.

Relaxation is important, too, said London. She recommended doing progressive muscle relaxation, alternately tensing and relaxing muscle groups in a sequential pattern.

"If you're at home and starting to get anxious because you're cooped up, put on a meditation tape or calming music and do nice, slow breathing," she said. "You could also get some travel magazines to think of something warm and happy."

London and Brownstein both emphasized social interaction to improve a glum mood.

"Misery loves company. Be proactive and reach out to people," said London.

Something as simple as renting a DVD, or borrowing one from the library for free, can become a fun gathering.

"Invite some people over, pop up some popcorn and have a movie afternoon," said London.

"Don't be isolated," said Brownstein. "If you are not able to see people face to face, talk to them on the telephone."

Winter storms often throw routines into chaos, and the sense of losing control can be frustrating. Brownstein advised adjusting expectations when that happens.

"Be realistic about how much you can get done and how much you just can't do," she said. "[You] can't control everything. Know your limits ... and get plenty of rest."

London said the prospect of driving to chemotherapy or radiation treatments

in bad weather raises the stress level in many of the patients she works with.

"They're afraid they'll be in a car accident; and if they get stuck, what's going to happen to them," said London. "If you have to drive, prepare an emergency kit for your car, so you have a sense of control."

Brownstein, whose agency serves clients with mental illness, said it's important to make the distinction between reacting to seasonal stresses and experiencing something more serious.

"Clinical depression is different: you're really feeling very sad, overwhelmed for a long period of time, not getting pleasure in the things you usually get pleasure from, sleeping too much or too little, eating too much or too little," she said. "In that instance, you really need to reach out for help."

Brownstein encouraged those who might be struggling with depression to call the Dutchess County Department of Mental Hygiene's Hotline, (845) 485-9700 or toll-free (877) 485-9700, to speak with a counselor on the telephone.

For those who are merely grouchy

about that cold white stuff that just won't go away, a scientist at the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies in Millbrook offers a different perspective: Maybe the "S word" isn't so bad, after all, and Mother (Nature) does know best.

"I have been involved with quite a bit of research into the effects of snow as an insulator," said Dr. Peter M. Groffman, a microbial ecologist at Cary Institute, via e-mail. "A thick blanket of snow ... insulate[s] the soil protecting plant roots and soil organisms from the stress of soil freezing. A deep snowpack is also an excellent way to store water that recharges groundwater and streams in the spring."

Last month, in fact, Dr. Groffman presented a lecture at Cary Institute, called "Snow is Good," where he discussed "how mild winters threaten soil productivity, plant growth and freshwater resources."

Talk of soil and plants conjures up thoughts of the spring that will eventually (albeit temporarily) vanquish Old Man Winter, and of summer, when heat and humidity will be the grumbling points of the day.