

Wellness from Within – Wisdom for Winter

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This time of year, it's not unusual for people to complain of the "Winter Blues". Many describe feeling unhappy, tired, sleepy or just plain unmotivated to do anything.

At the same time, we're all being bombarded with the constant commercial message to do more, buy presents, socialize at parties, and strive to achieve the perfect holiday season through increased activity and consumption.

Given these two contrasting messages – one from our bodies and one from our culture - many people feel like they're doing something wrong, which further compounds their frustration over not having enough energy.

For most of us, the quick solution to this dilemma is to artificially change how we feel. Many folks self-medicate by drinking excessive amounts of coffee, sodas or energy drinks containing caffeine and other stimulating substances. Other people crave sugars and carbohydrates more strongly. Athletes may exercise more vigorously to achieve an adrenaline high. Some people get diagnosed as "depressed" and rely on anti-depressants to survive the darkest months.

All of these approaches temporarily alter body/mind chemistry to give the sensation of more energy. Unfortunately, artificial stimulants deplete your body of resources so you will ultimately feel more tired and less energetic the next day.

Even exercise can be depleting without sufficient rest and recovery time. And while anti-depressants are effective, they still come with side-effects, difficult withdrawal periods, and they sometimes mask symptoms or emotions that have to be dealt with eventually.

Here's a radical idea: What if all the symptoms we mentioned are not an indication that there's something wrong, but they are actually signs that your body is trying to align itself with the natural order of life in the winter season?

It is normal to have less energy in the winter. It's normal to want to do less and sleep more. And it's normal to want to be more introspective and less social. It is asking for trouble to expect the same level of performance from yourself in the winter as you enjoy in the summer.

Chinese medicine is based on the observation of the rhythms and cycles in nature in the external world and how these observations give insight into the internal microcosm of the human body. Humans are part of nature, not separate from it. Therefore, if we constantly push against the wisdom of our bodies, we are bound to end up with illness and disease.

In winter, as with every season, we should take our cues of how to act by watching what is going on outside and by listening to what our bodies tell us. When there's less sun, we need more sleep. When the weather is colder, we need to eat more warming foods like soups and stews. When trees go dormant and mammals hibernate, it's a time to simply do less. Yes, we're saying it, DO LESS.

As is the case with most ancient wisdom, this probably sounds too simple to be true. So, don't believe us. Try it for yourself and find out. For one week, commit to getting to bed by 10pm and see what you notice. Or pick a time at the end of the day when you will absolutely not continue to work. Spend fifteen minutes each day doing nothing but sitting and paying attention to your breathing. Sounds easy, but some people can't sit still for one minute, let alone fifteen.

We live in a culture that values activity over stillness - if we're not producing something then we're not justifying our existence. We're conditioned to equate stillness with death. But nothing in the natural world exists without periods of inactivity. It's neither realistic nor sustainable to live life with the idea that we can continuously drive month after month taking no notice of the natural rhythms of life that surround us.

Winter reminds us to take the time and actions necessary to replenish our energy stores so we can rise again to a prolific and abundant spring.

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