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The Gentle Art of WINTERING

How to Create a **COZY LIFE** During the Cold Months

Embrace winter's slower pace for less stress,
greater well-being, and happier living.

By
Christa M.
Hines

The weekend Maribel Henkel, a native of the arid, sunny Southwest, moved to Missouri, a snowstorm dumped several feet of snow on the ground. Unprepared for the barren landscape, gloomy weather, and freezing temperatures in her new hometown, Henkel struggled to adapt. So began a challenging cycle of dreading the winter season.

"My kids love winter, and my husband is happiest in winter, which I couldn't understand,"

Henkel says. "I tried to find contentment in the winter months on my own, struggling to hide my depression."

It wasn't until later that the mom of three realized she was suffering from seasonal affective disorder (SAD), often referred to as the "winter blues." SAD is characterized by changes in mood and behavior as the days become shorter in the fall and winter.

"It's like living in black and white," Henkel says. "You dread getting out of bed because it's so cold and gray outside. It's a sad feeling, and you can't explain it other than something's missing."

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, millions of Americans suffer from symptoms of seasonal depression, a condition that often doesn't resolve until spring and summer arrive. (Although less common, some people suffer from summer SAD rather than winter-onset.)

Then, three years ago, Henkel found refuge in a uniquely Scandinavian approach called hygge

(pronounced “hoo-gah” or “hue-gah”). Related to an old Nordic word meaning “protected from the outside world,” hygge is a Danish concept grounded in a slower, more intentional approach to life. It encompasses mindful self-care, spending time with loved ones, and embracing life’s simple pleasures. Danes especially embrace hygge during their cold, wet winter months and consider it a vital part of well-being.

Hygge-supported Healing

Inspired by her Scandinavian heritage, integrative mental health professional Tawnya Davis, LCPC, weaves the principles of hygge (comfort, coziness, and connection) and lagom (a Swedish word that means balance and moderation) with evidence-based therapies.

“Healing isn’t just about resolving pain but also about intentionally nurturing joy, presence, and self-compassion,” she says.

By cultivating a sense of peace, she’s seen profound shifts among clients navigating chronic illness, trauma, and grief.

“People often heal best in environments where they feel safe, nurtured, and connected. Hygge encourages creating spaces—both physically and emotionally—that foster warmth and security,” says Davis, who owns Manna Mental Health in Bonner Springs, Kansas.

Winter Practices That Comfort and Restore

This winter, consider how you can incorporate these comforting, healing principles in your own home and life:

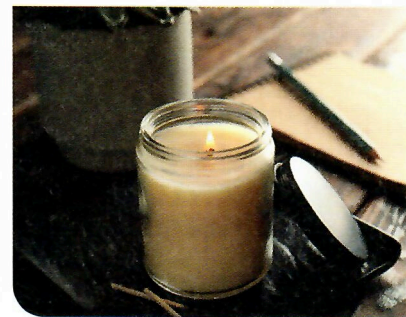
Establish a sense of safety.

Your space influences your peace of mind. Davis guides clients by example. Instead of meeting them in a clinical setting with harsh fluorescent lighting and linoleum floors, Davis integrates cozy textiles, the warm glow of an artificial fireplace, and uplifting, organic essential oils that smell like frosty Norse woods.

“One of the most significant breakthroughs I’ve seen is clients begin to internalize a sense of



PHOTO BY OLESIA HNATKEVICH ON UNSPLASH



Hygge encourages creating spaces—both physically and emotionally—that foster warmth and security.

emotional safety,” Davis says. “When they learn to bring warmth and balance into their daily lives, they also cultivate self-soothing skills, reducing anxiety and fostering resilience in ways that feel natural and sustainable.”

From wearing soft, comfy clothes to surrounding yourself with snuggly blankets and soothing scents, you “signal safety and comfort to the nervous system,” Davis says. “This is especially helpful for grounding during anxious moments. Pets are a great source of comfort too!”

Find solace in meaningful connection.

While frosty temps and icy conditions can drive us indoors, too much seclusion can aggravate

Symptoms of Winter Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Do the cold, dark months take a toll on your mental health? Here are the signs that it could be more than just the winter blues:

- Persistent sadness, anxiety, irritability
- Feelings of emptiness, hopelessness, pessimism
- Frustration, restlessness
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities
- Decreased energy
- Trouble concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Sleeping more than usual
- Overeating (especially craving carbs), leading to unplanned weight gain
- Withdrawing from social activities, "hibernating"
- Physical aches and pains with no clear cause that don't resolve with treatment

If you're struggling with symptoms of depression or anxiety, consult your physician.

SOURCE: NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH



depression and anxiety. Find a happy medium with small, intentional ways to connect. "Sharing a meal, a phone call with a loved one, or a cozy book club can provide warmth and emotional support," Davis says.

Virtual connections count too. Henkel joined two hygge-inspired Facebook groups, including Hygge Home, which she now moderates.

The positive online community "changed my outlook on winter and of life in general," Henkel says. "Something we all have in common is the need to feel inner peace and comfort, the feeling of a warm hug. Groups like this bring smiles to people's faces. It's a community and we learn from each other."

Seek the light.

SAD is thought to be triggered by a drop in daily sunlight exposure, causing us to feel depressed, less alert, and sluggish. Try bundling up and heading outside for a 30-minute walk soon after sunrise. Researchers at Harvard Medical School say it can be as beneficial as light therapy. Exercise also releases mood-boosting endorphins.

If you're unable to walk, sitting outside for 15 minutes works too. Also, consider supplementing your diet with vitamin D.

Henkel suggests using candles, twinkling fairy lights, or Christmas lights to cozy up your space. Soft lighting eases stress and anxiety and enhances feelings of calm and comfort. "Adding light to the dark days of winter gives my home a peaceful ambiance," she says.

Bring the outdoors in.

Shut out the chill, but do incorporate natural elements. Houseplants and comforting scents, like pine and lavender, offer relief from anxiety and negative thought spirals.

"Plants add life and vitality to any space. Some can absorb toxins and reduce stress," says Robyn Stevens, a consultant and speaker who helps people set up living spaces that support well-being.

A NASA study found that plants—including spider plants, rubber plants, and snake plants—can help clean the air in your home by removing pollutants and chemicals found in common household products.

Furthermore, research suggests that caring for and surrounding yourself with plants supports memory and focus, boosts productivity, and contributes to creativity, happiness, and relaxation.

Don't have much of a green thumb? "Even high-quality faux plants can transform and warm up any space," Stevens says.

Create comforting rituals and routines.

Davis encourages her clients to engage in simple, soothing daily practices like lighting a candle before journaling and taking time for stillness without feeling guilty.

"The human nervous system finds solace and safety with rituals and routine," Davis explains. "Whether it's a morning cup of tea, a brief gratitude reflection, or a daily walk at dawn bundled up in cozy clothes, small rituals offer predictability and a sense of gentle structure, which are essential for managing stress."

Meaningful rituals and winter traditions can also strengthen family bonds and make the season more joyful. Henkel has created a series of comforting winter routines in her home. As fall turns to winter, she stocks a beverage station with a selection of hot drinks. Throughout the winter, she and her husband have a standing weekend morning date at their favorite breakfast restaurant. And to give the family something to look forward to each year, they enjoy delicious soups, wholesome stews, and her husband's homemade cinnamon rolls that they only make during the winter months.

"On snow days, I love making a big pot of hot cocoa. I bake some banana bread—a favorite in our house. We watch movies and just relax in our cozy family room with blankets on the couch, the electric fireplace on, and the dogs in their beds," Henkel says. "I don't know if they realize it, but that is the most hygge feeling to me—the contentment of being together, feeling warm and safe."

Take time to restore.

With our 24-hour news cycles, technology, and chaotic lives competing for our attention, it's easy to ignore nature's cues to slow down in the winter. This time of year invites a more restorative approach—and it's good for us.

"The natural landscape around us hibernates and retreats during winter. Trees lose their leaves to prepare for new growth, but they need

a season of rest first. Many animals hibernate and reduce their energy expenditure," Davis says. "Why wouldn't we follow that lead and embrace how natural it is for us as humans to do the same?"

Choose quiet, restorative activities such as these:

- + **Burrow under a soft, thick blanket with a good book.**
- + **Knit by a crackling fire.**
- + **Relax in a lavender-infused Epsom salt bath.**
- + **Escape into a paint-by-number art project.**
- + **Indulge in a leisurely day spent in cozy flannel pajamas.**

"Lagom teaches us that well-being thrives in moderation," Davis says. "Instead of pressuring yourself to be overly productive or withdrawing completely, aim for a rhythm that honors both movement—gentle stretching, winter walks—and restoration—naps and quiet evenings."

Uncover more peace and happiness.

Our living spaces often mirror what's happening in our lives. If your home is disorganized and cluttered, you might be feeling scattered, overwhelmed, burned out, and unable to concentrate.

"Everything you surround yourself with—everything you see—shapes your energy and influences your life every single day," says Stevens. "When our home feels good, we feel good. And that's the ultimate goal—creating a space that truly supports and uplifts us."

Take a careful look around your space and remove anything you no longer want or use. After you've decluttered, "audit what's left," Stevens says. Then, ask yourself: *Does my space feel warm and cozy? Or does it feel cold and uninviting?*

Hygge can mean something different for everyone, Henkel says. "Keep only the things you love around you. If it gives you a bad vibe, give it away as soon as possible."

Stevens agrees: "Soft lighting, cozy furniture, plants, intentional art that represents the things you want in life all create a nurturing environment." **vi**



The human nervous system finds solace and safety with rituals and routine.

After dreading Midwest winters for nearly 30 years, writer Christa M. Hines now sees winter as the perfect excuse to escape the world by snuggling up with a good book.