

Seasonal psychology

The impact of shortening days on mood is well known, but there is a much broader psychological impact to all the seasons, both positive and negative. **Matt Jarvis** explains

SHUTTERSTOCK/ADOBESTOCK

Nature gives to every time and season unique beauty.

Charles Dickens

It's now autumn, and so far (I'm writing this in September) I'm mostly seeing grey skies and feeling cold – very little sign of 'unique beauty' as yet. The impact of shortening days on mood in the form of seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is well known, but actually there is a much broader psychological impact to all the seasons, both positive and negative. This has long been recognised in literature. Kristin

Armstrong effectively captured the positive impact of seasonal change, saying, 'When the seasons shift, even the subtle beginning, the scent of a promised change, I feel something stir inside me. Hopefulness? Gratitude? Openness? Whatever it is, it's welcome.'

The psychological downside of seasons

Before we get too carried away with the psychological positives of seasons, we should

acknowledge the very real and serious suffering people go through as a result of SAD. SAD is a mental health condition characterised by depression associated with particular times of year. People whose mood is strongly affected by season are known as seasonally sensitive.

The precise mechanisms of SAD and seasonal sensitivity are not well understood, but in the case of winter SAD, this is likely to be the result of disruption to body clocks and/or serotonin production. Around 5% of the global population suffer clinical winter SAD, with another 9% or so experiencing significant symptoms. Prevalence varies with latitude, with more people experiencing SAD further from the equator. You may be surprised to learn that around 0.6% of people worldwide suffer from summer SAD. This is harder to explain but may be the result of sleep disruption due to high temperature and humidity.

It's not just about warm and cold

Because mood tends to be lower (in seasonally sensitive people at least) in winter when it is colder, it would be easy to conclude that cold weather is bad for our mood. This is a classic example of the limitations of using a correlation to judge cause and effect. In fact, in a study by Behnke et al (2021), when other variables like season, precipitation and time of day were controlled for, people's mood was consistently better when the weather was cold.

Positive psychological impact of the autumn and winter

Before reading this article you might have believed that in psychological terms summer/warm = good, and winter/cold = bad. We have already seen that the picture is more complicated than this. Around 7% of the UK population identify as 'winter people,' suggesting that even some seasonally sensitive people are happier in the winter. There may be multiple aspects to this, from taking pleasure in the cosiness of fire to happy associations

with Halloween and Bonfire Night parties and Christmas presents.

To further muddy the waters there also appear to be some general psychological benefits to winter. People appear to be more generous in winter – a Swedish study (Ekstrom, 2018) found a 14% increase in donations to charity in December, while Greenberg (2016) found that waiters received more in tips. Physical aggression tends to decline in the winter, although it's unclear to what extent this is a real psychological effect of season as opposed to the practical difficulties of getting into confrontations when it's cold and dark. The latter interpretation is supported by the fact that social media posts tend to be more aggressive in winter (Stephens et al, 2021).

Conclusion

The seasons undoubtedly have an impact on human psychology. However, this impact is more nuanced than we might expect. SAD should always be treated seriously, but not all the psychological effects of winter are negative.

Activity

- 1 There is research showing that musical preferences change according to season. Design a study to investigate this. You could collect subjective data by surveying or objective data from streaming platforms.
- 2 Carry out a literature search on the relationship between season and a behavioural variable of your choice. You might wish to focus on something covered here, like generosity or aggression. Or you could choose something different. What conclusions do you draw?

Find out more about our full range of magazines and online archives of back issues at www.hachettelearning.com/magazines

Did you like this article?
Tell us what you think