

Beat the seasonal blues

...how to feel good quickly without alcohol or drugs

CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR ARE TIMES OF HIGH STRESS AND CARRY A HIGH RISK OF RELAPSE FOR PEOPLE IN RECOVERY – THERE ARE HINTS AND TIPS ON OUR WEBSITE ON HOW TO SURVIVE THIS TIME, WHILE ALEX PACKER ADDS 10 MORE WAYS TO FEEL BETTER FAST

Getting high is fun. It is natural and healthy. In fact, the desire to experience ecstatic moments and alternative states of consciousness is in our genes. Think about it. Infants know what feels good and seek it out – whether it is a bottle or a cuddle. Little children ‘get high’ by rolling down grassy hills, going higher on the swing, looking at the world upside down through their legs, banging on drums or having Daddy toss them in the air. They do not know that they are altering their consciousness; they just do it.

Do you think it is an accident that behaviours necessary for the survival of the species are pleasurable? How long do you think the human race would last if every time someone ate a meal they said “YICCCCH, BLECCCCCH, I hate this”? We are *supposed* to enjoy life.

The problem with the pursuit of pleasure is that there are many ways to go about it – and some are healthy while some are addictive and costly.

Many non-drug highs require practice, knowledge, patience or training. But people who seek natural highs report that they get more peace, pleasure, excitement and insight from these experiences than they ever did from taking drugs. And natural highs do not leave you feeling dull, exhausted or hungover. The best highs are the ones you create for yourself. This article will show you how to create different types of highs.

SERENITY HIGHS. One of the greatest highs you can give yourself in today’s rude, noisy, fast-paced world is serenity. Peacefulness. A feeling of calm amid the storm. The ability to let deadlines, pressures and inconsiderate buffoons huff and puff – while you maintain your balance, perspective and sense of humour. Let’s begin with strategies for dealing with stress. After all, how can you get high if you are a nervous wreck?

FIRST, BREATHE YOUR STRESS AWAY:

1. Sit up straight in a chair without armrests. Place your hands in your lap. Keep your feet flat on the floor (you can also lie on your back on a carpet or blanket).
2. Breathe in smoothly and deeply through your nose. Allow your abdomen and chest to expand and your shoulders to rise slightly. Visualise the air flowing into your lungs, chest and abdomen.
3. S-l-o-w-l-y breathe out through your nose. Exhaling should take longer than inhaling.
4. Continue to breathe this way for at least a minute. Fill your lungs to capacity but do not hold your breath or strain yourself. You want to find a rhythm that feels easy and natural.

Doing this for a minute will refresh you. Doing it for 10-20 minutes a day, you will notice even greater benefits.

TO GET RID OF SAD BREATH, TRY A SIGH HIGH:

1. Sit or stand up. Keep your spine straight.

2. Now sigh. Deeply and audibly. Let everything you are feeling escape with the air flowing out of your lungs.
3. Breathe in naturally.
4. Again, sigh away the contents of your lungs.
5. Take 10-15 “sigh breaths”. You will feel much calmer.

ENJOY A LOUD BREATHING HIGH THAT BREAKS THE ICE IN GROUPS:

1. Stand up straight, feet about six inches apart. Inhale through your nose while counting to four.
2. When your lungs are full, expel the air out forcefully and explosively through your mouth while saying out loud “shoo” or “hoo” or even “poo”. Stretch out the word and exhalation for as long as you can. As you breathe out, drop your upper body toward the floor, bending your knees.
3. Hang there limp and relaxed for a few seconds. Slowly rise while inhaling to a count of eight. When you are fully standing, breathe out to a count of two.
4. Repeat the sequence until you feel alert and relaxed.

MEDITATION HIGHS. It is hard to meditate if your muscles are tied in knots and you feel achy, so it is a good idea to begin with a ‘progressive relaxation’. You can use this technique any time you feel tension and/or discomfort, even if you do not meditate afterwards.

PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION – MIND OVER MUSCLE:

1. Sit in a comfortable position or lie down.
2. Close your eyes and relax (if sitting, place your arms on your lap; if lying, place your hands along your sides)
3. Breathe slowly and deeply from the diaphragm.
4. Concentrate on the muscles at the top of your head. Think the word *relax* and consciously relax those muscles.
5. When the top of your head is relaxed, bring your attention to your forehead and the area around your eyes. Continue to say relax as you relax these muscles.
6. Now move to the muscles of your temples and ears. Relax them. Then your sinuses and nasal area. Once these areas are relaxed, go on to the back of your neck. Stay with each muscle until it is tension-free.
7. Continue to relax your shoulders, arms, hands, fingers, chest, abdomen... all the way down to your toe nails.

The goal of the next meditation is to observe, without judgment, what is on your mind and to let the thoughts leave your mind so that you can experience peace and joy. TRY BUBBLE, BUBBLE, TOIL AND TROUBLE:

1. Assume your preferred meditation posture (see right)
2. Close your eyes and relax into your breathing.
3. Imagine you are sitting at the bottom of a deep pool of water. The water is warm, soothing and full of light.
4. Each time you have a thought, feeling or sensation, visualise it as a bubble. Let the bubble float to the surface and vanish.
5. As a new thought appears, see it as a bubble and let

- it, too, rise. If thoughts comes in rapid succession, they can float to the surface as a group of bubbles.
6. Do not think about your thoughts; do not criticise, evaluate, scrutinise, weigh, ponder or argue with your thoughts. Just let them be. Let them float in front of, and away from, your mind’s eye.

VISUALISATION – SAY GOODBYE TO SADNESS/PAINFUL FEELINGS:

1. Close your eyes. Visualise your sadness – or guilt, pain, shame, loneliness or hopelessness – as an ominous dark cloud. Centre it where you feel the most hurt, be it in your heart, head, stomach or elsewhere. The cloud might feel heavy or suffocating. It might churn and billow. Acknowledge the cloud of sadness.
2. The sadness hurts. But you can stand your ground.
3. Now you are going to let go of your sadness. You are going to expel it with a part of every exhalation.
4. Breathe naturally. Every time you exhale, visualise the cloud escaping from your body like steam from a kettle. Soon, the cloud is outside you. It drifts away. Slowly. Steadily, you watch it float into the distance. Far, far away. You can barely make it out. It becomes tinier and tinier. It is a hazy dot on the horizon. It... disappears.
5. Your sadness is out of sight. Out of mind. Out of body. You are no longer sad. Your hurt and tension have floated off into the far-distant sky. You feel relaxed. You are calm. You are light. You are at peace.

Visualisation works by tricking the brain. The picture you create is so ‘real’ that your brain does not know that it is coming from your mind and imagination rather than from external stimuli. So it ‘hears’ the soothing waves and ‘sees’ the sparkling water and ‘feels’ the warm sun – and sends signals to your body telling it to relax.

HEALTHY EATING HIGHS. When we eat sugar, a chemical called tryptophan goes to the brain, where it is converted into another chemical called serotonin. This is the natural opiate which stimulates the pleasure centres in the brain and makes us feel calm and relaxed – a lack of serotonin is linked to addictions to compensate. Obviously, too much sugar can be addictive in itself and, at the very least, can lead to chronic tiredness. But if

you are stressed from, say, a lack of sleep, one way to make yourself sleepy is to eat a banana one to two hours before bedtime. Or an apple. Or any other low-protein, high-carbohydrate snack, as this increases tryptophan in your brain which then increases your serotonin – which has been shown to help people fall asleep 50% faster, and improve the quality and duration of sleep.

VISUAL HIGHS. Here is a powerful way to alter your consciousness which is practised by many monks and shamans. First, ensure your hands and face are clean. Then sit in a comfortable chair. Close your eyes and *gently* rub your eyeballs by pressing lightly with your fingertips near the inside corners of your eyes. Do this for about five seconds. You will see coloured spots and shapes. These are called phosphenes. Experiment by varying the pressure and location of your fingertips – but always massage *very lightly*. Enjoy the show

WATERY VARIATION: Close your eyes in the shower. Turn your face towards the shower head so the water falls on your closed eyelids. You will see stars.

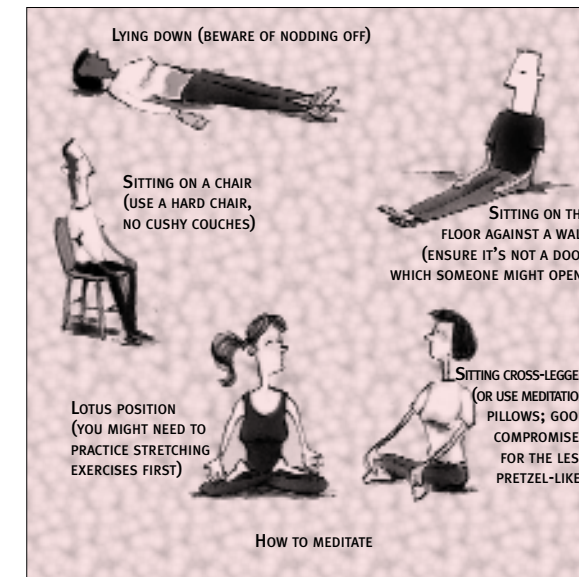
And, of course, there is the beauty of nature. Talk a walk in your local park, to a beach, look at trees in the street, see your garden with new eyes right down to petals and fallen leaves, look at the sunset...

SENSUOUS HIGHS. Our senses give some of the greatest highs: viewing a sunset over the ocean,

tasting a gourmet meal, listening to music, inhaling the fragrance of a flower, touching someone we love.

So... TRY ‘KISSING PALMS’ WITH A FAMILY MEMBER OR CLOSE FRIEND.

1. Sit opposite each other.
2. Make a “palmist’s kiss”. Hold up your hands and press your right palm to your partner’s left palm. Press your left palm to his/her right palm.
3. Close your eyes. Picture the warm, positive, life-affirming energy flowing between your palms, flooding through your bodies, cleansing you of all fear.
4. Interlock your fingers and squeeze. You will experience an intense feeling of warmth, safety, emotional closeness.
5. Open your eyes and marvel at how such a simple moment of contact can produce such a rush of intimacy and unspoken communication.



Alex Packer is CEO of FCD Educational Services, a nonprofit organisation which offers alcohol, tobacco and other drug education and prevention programmes for schools. A specialist in substance abuse, adolescence and parent education, he is author of numerous books including *Parenting One Day At A Time* and *Highs! Over 150 Ways To Feel Really, Really Good... Without Alcohol Or Other Drugs* (www.freespirit.com ISBN 1-57542-074-0).

When asked to supply a photograph, Packer refused: “What?! And never be able to watch a sunset again without hordes of adoring readers whispering ‘Look, the guy who wrote Highs! is getting high!’”.