How to Fight Isolation With RA During the Winter Months

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Avoiding Cabin Fever This Winter

Living with RA can be challenging at the best of times, but add bitter cold and restricted spaces, and you may begin to suffer more than you expect. The longer you stay inside, the more cramped your body, mind, and lifestyle can become, and that's when cabin fever – that feeling of anxiety, irritability, and malaise – sets in.

Morning stiffness can last longer when your active routine falls by the wayside, joint pain can set in more quickly in the cold, and isolation can make everything feel worse. But you can't let winter get the best of you or your RA management plan: fight off cabin fever with a few small adjustments that will keep you happy and limber until spring arrives.

A Healthy Diet for a Happier State of Mind

What you eat – and don't eat – has a lot of bearing on your attitude, as well as your joint health. After all, a happy outlook makes it much easier to keep up an active lifestyle, and certain ingredients can feed your outlook as much as your body:

- **Omega 3 fatty acids elevates mood.** Salmon, flax seed, and walnuts are high in omega 3 fatty acids, which have a measurable impact on happiness and energy. Since these important fatty acids also reduce inflammation and calm the immune system, they should play a big role in your winter menu.
- **Zinc reduces stress**. Zinc helps to moderate your body's stress response, and acts as an anti-inflammatory and anti-depressant. Luckily, there are a number of natural sources, with meat and nuts topping the list: add some lean beef, mussels, or cashews when your stress and anxiety begin to get the better of you.
- **Vitamin D keeps you balanced.** Research shows that vitamin D deficiency contributes to a variety of mood disorders, so when you can't get your daily dose of natural sunlight, drink more vitamin D-fortified milk and juice.
- **Vitamin B keeps you energized.** B12, folic acid, and niacin are incredibly important for energy metabolism. Add more eggs, lean meat, fish and dairy to your diet, and you'll soon notice a big change in your energy levels.
- **Tryptophan makes you happy.** The tryptophan in foods like turkey, tofu, asparagus, and sunflower seeds is converted into serotonin, the neurotransmitter that keeps you feeling peaceful and content.

Too much sugar can give you quick high and a big low, but don't deny yourself a treat now and then. Flavors and scents can have a powerful effect on your mood, and decadent desserts or aromatic beverages can deliver quick (and delicious) results.

Lavender is relaxing, and can be steeped into tea, or even baked into cookies. And if you're feeling particularly drained, spike your hot chocolate with a bit of peppermint extract – mint is one of the most uplifting scents, and along with grapefruit and vanilla, it will help combat depression and anxiety.

Stay Active Inside and Outside

Although cold weather may not cause inflammation, it does tend to exacerbate stiffness. Many RA sufferers experience deeper, longer-lasting morning stiffness in the colder months, and that can wreak havoc on your daily schedule. But movement is the best medicine for stiff joints, and there's plenty you can do to stay active – and maybe even enjoy some of winter's charms:

- **Stretch in a warm place.** Changes in weather (and drops in temperature) can expand your ligaments and put pressure on your joints, so when winter storms are moving around, get extra warm for more relief. Stretching is an important part of any RA management plan, but you can reap more benefit when you add heat: use a space heater in a small room for a nice and toasty atmosphere, then move through some slow, deep stretches. Alternatively, soak in the tub in the morning and in the evening, and do your stretches while the water supports your muscles and joints
- **Practice yoga.** One of the best indoor activities for any level of fitness, yoga is the perfect remedy for a dull, draining day inside. There are all sorts of styles, and an enormous range of poses to target and train every bit of your body. You can find lots of videos online, or else go through your favorite sequence of poses. In fact, doing the same set of poses in each session has proven meditative, restorative, and confidence-building effects.
- **Play in the snow**. When the biting wind does down, bundle up and head out into the snow. You don't have to commit to a whole day in the cold; a few minutes of fresh air and distraction may be all you need to get in touch with your inner child and get in touch with nature again. Spending time outside can be both revitalizing and grounding.

Of course, knowing when to rest is an important part of living with RA. Just make sure you can keep your mind busy and happy while your joints rest and recover – keep a stack of books, a journal or a craft corner in plain sight, so you don't drift into laziness. Boredom is cabin fever's closest ally.

Fight Isolation

The more pain, fatigue and stiffness you feel, the more likely you'll give into your comfy couch rather than reach out to a friend. But separating from the world around you can have lasting negative effects on your mind and body.

If you want to ward off cabin fever, you have to stay social. It's well known that too much solitude plus physical suffering can equal depression, and recent research suggests that myelin is to blame (or rather, a lack of it).

When people or animals are isolated from others, their brains produce less of this important chemical, and since myelin is necessary for complex thinking and a balanced emotional experience, too little could lead to changes in behavior, or even mental illness.

Interact with the people around you to keep your myelin at a healthy level. You may not feel like a social butterfly, but a friendly hello or short chat with a smiling acquaintance can maintain bonds and leave you with a sense of empathy and purpose.

It may be worth planning a gathering one or twice a week outside of your home: a coffee with a friend or neighbor, a casual book club meeting, or even a formal class that you can commit to for a while. A change of scenery can bring immediate relief, creativity, and newfound motivation to live your days to the fullest.