

YOGA TO BEAT THE SEASONAL BLUES

Feeling out of step with the rhythm of the seasons, Lucy Greeves turns to ancient wisdom to treat a modern malady

HAVE AN aunt who loves the autumn. Spring makes her feel itchy and anxious, summer hot and cross. But at this time of year, she comes alive: invigorated by the cooler air, rested by the darker nights. I'm exactly the opposite. The merest sniff of woodsmoke and piled leaves is enough to bring on a vague melancholy that creeps around my ankles like a late October fog.

I'm not alone; according to the NHS, one in 15 people in the UK suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder, with symptoms that include depression, lethargy, anxiety and overeating. Many more of us experience a milder version of the 'winter blues'. As the blaze of autumn colour gives way to drab skies and bare branches, we wish we could simply hibernate until spring.

That's ok, according to psychologist and yoga therapist Dr Lisa Kaley-Isley. It's natural to feel like drawing in your horns as the cold season begins. "We talk about the weather all the time, but we don't realise just how much it influences us. Dwindling light and falling temperatures directly affect our circadian rhythms. Everything is telling us to go to bed earlier, but we try to override that."

For many of us, autumn is back-to-school busy, with work responsibilities in full swing and the crazy merry-go-round of the festive season looming into view. No wonder we feel low, says Lisa:

our natural cycles and our always-on working culture are making conflicting demands on us. We've lost the skill of knowing how to gracefully ebb and flow with the rhythm of the seasons. "We act like we're separate from our environment, but we're not really."

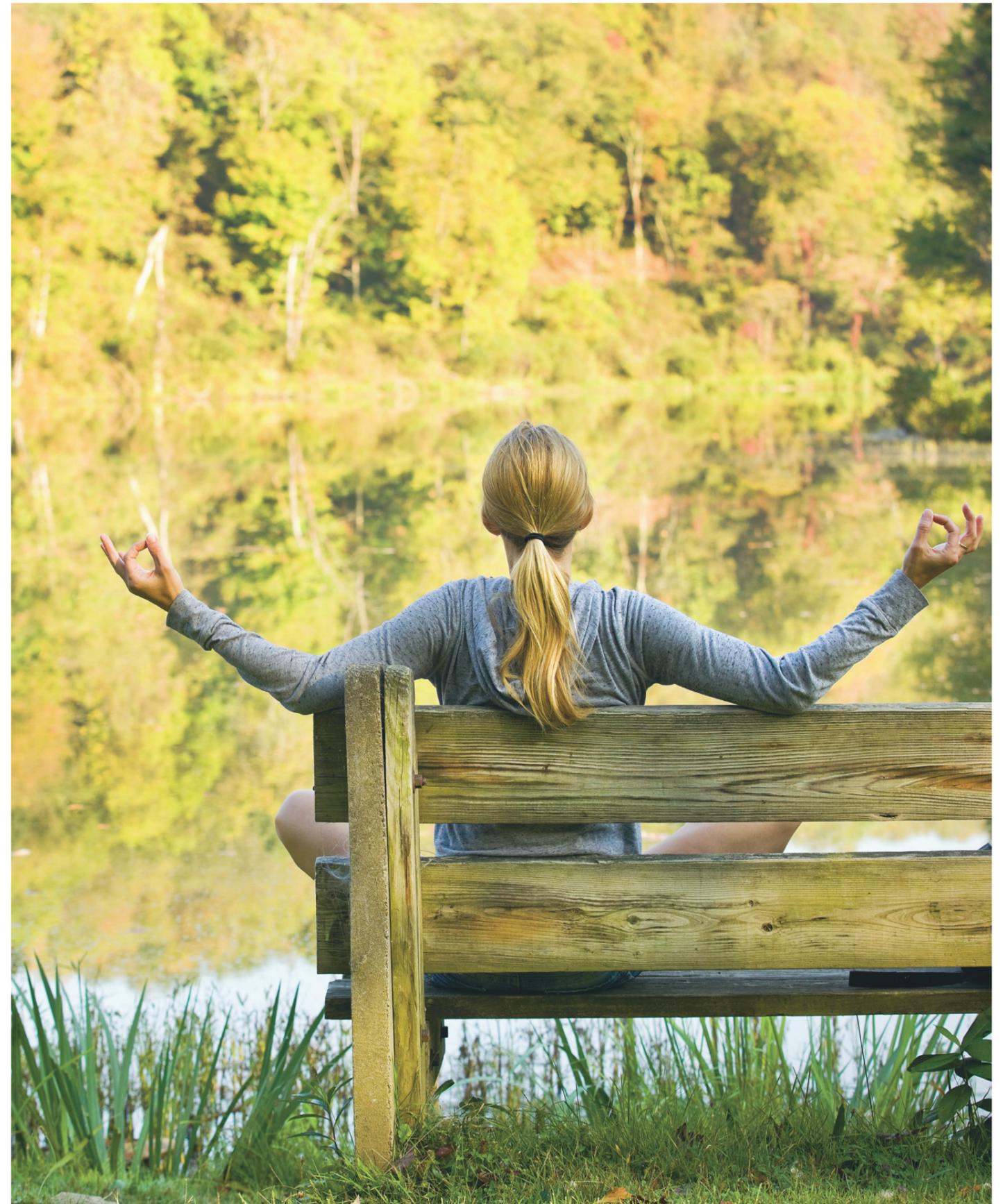
So is the answer to give in, and simply sink into the seasonal slump? I ask, half hoping she will give me permission to take a four-month-long duvet day.

Not at all. "It's about balancing the demands of our environment and our culture: you need to find a time and a place to rest and restore, and a time and a place to carry on with your life."

In Dr Kaley-Isley's experience, yoga can be profoundly helpful to us in seeking that balance. But there's no magic bullet. "Yoga addresses the whole person, so the treatment is always holistic and multi-modal." Read on for a fourfold, yoga-inspired prescription to beat the blues and fill your autumn days with light and joy. ►

Dr Lisa Kaley-Isley runs a low-cost yoga therapy clinic at The Life Centre in Islington and is on the teaching faculty at Yoga Campus. Her next workshop, "Yoga Alchemy: Transforming Anxiety into Constructive Energy" is on November 4. thelifecentre.com

PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCK





REST WISELY

Autumn asks us to listen to our bodies, building in more time for rest in tune with naturally lower energy levels. If you think you're wasting your time, think again. When you rest well, you're actively developing a skill that's vital to quality of life.

Prioritise good quality sleep and regular 'time out' - restorative yoga poses are easy to do at home. Try this: lie down on a mat or blanket with your legs resting up the wall (as shown). Alternatively, rest your lower legs on the seat of a chair or sofa. Relax completely for 5-15 minutes. If you find this difficult, try listening to an audio meditation at the same time: the Insight Timer app and yoganidranetwork.org are great for free relaxation tracks.



GET MOVING

It's all about balance: too much rest is as unhelpful as too little. Try to move your body every day; that could be as simple as a brisk walk out of doors, in daylight. When it comes to yoga, slow, mindful sun salutations are a brilliant way to keep your circulation, respiration and flexibility ticking over.

If you're not feeling energetic or motivated enough for your usual workouts, now is a great time to try a gentle yoga class. Look out for descriptions like 'slow flow', 'viniyoga', 'Scaravelli-inspired', 'mindful yoga'. You're looking for a class that keeps you moving, but doesn't drain you: ideally, you should leave feeling more energetic, not less.

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TURN ON THE LIGHTS

When the sun's light grows weaker, says Lisa, then it's time to turn on the lights within. That means literally - gathering around the fire, putting up the Christmas lights early - and symbolically, with meaningful practices that cultivate a sense of inner light.

Try this: Trataka is a traditional hatha yoga practice which helps you to focus on the light within. Sitting as if for meditation, gaze at the flame of a candle until you can no longer resist the urge to blink, then close your eyes and concentrate on the after-image of the flame.



GET TOGETHER

Community keeps us going in dark times. It's the reason why people throughout history have celebrated winter festivals, like Thanksgiving and Christmas. These social gatherings are supposed to nourish us; if yours are more of an obligation than a pleasure. Learn to say no to invitations you don't relish. If family is a major drain on your energies, get your social vitamins elsewhere: seek out a community with less baggage, whether that's a choir, or a group of volunteers. And think about ways to up the nourishment quotient of the groups you're already part of: organise a cup of tea after yoga class, or start a chat with old friends you're always saying you should see more often.

AUTUMN SOS?

If it's too late for preventative measures, and you're already in the grip of SAD, please ask for help. The NHS recognises this as a genuine health concern, so talk to a sympathetic GP, or consult a therapist or counsellor in private practice (useful resources include mind.org.uk, bacp.org.uk and welldoing.org).