

The Scandinavian secrets to keeping positive in a covid-19 winter

Lockdown restrictions in winter might seem something to dread, but we can combat this by embracing the mindset of people used to long, dark winters, says health psychologist Kari Leibowitz

WHEN health psychologist [Kari Leibowitz](#) moved from the US to the Norwegian town of Tromsø, more than 300 kilometres north of the Arctic circle, her research became personal. Inspired by recent findings on the ways in which people's [attitudes influence their mental and physical health](#), she wondered whether this might be the secret to coping with the long, dark Nordic winter. Her research revealed that many Norwegians have a winter mindset that allows them to thrive in conditions she was dreading. Now back in the US at Stanford University, Leibowitz believes her findings hold lessons for us all, especially for people living in the northern hemisphere who, as the nights draw in, face the dual challenges of winter and a stressful pandemic.

David Robson: What are “mindsets” and why are they so important?

Kari Leibowitz: I think of mindsets as a framework that helps us simplify information and make sense of the world. And we're really just at the beginning of unpacking the ways that they can shape our health and well-being.

A lot of my research now is looking at how we can use mindsets in clinical practice. In one of the last studies that I did, we tested the effects of changing people's mindsets – even without treatment. We brought our participants to the lab and we pricked them with histamine, triggering a minor allergic reaction that looks a bit like a mosquito bite. For some people, a doctor just examined their arm; for the others, the doctor examined their arm and said: “OK, from now on, the itch and irritation will feel better and your rash is going to start to go away.” [That single sentence reduced people's symptoms](#). It is a really tangible example of the ways that using mindsets can help patients feel better.

How can the mindset we have help us cope with stress?

I am all for things like getting enough sleep, meditating, exercising and taking walks with friends. But so much of the stress management framework tells people that they have to reduce their stress, and that if they can't then it's going to lead to higher blood pressure and heart disease and cancer. Unfortunately, most of the stresses that we experience aren't things that we can actually reduce. You need to find ways to channel the energy.

Research on stress mindsets shows that [when we view stress as being useful](#) for our health and performance and mental well-being, it actually creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. One of my favourite studies – [a huge survey of 30,000 people](#) in the US – found that those who experienced a lot of stress but didn't think that it was bad for them had better outcomes than people who experienced less stress but perceived it as damaging. Having a little bit of stress can keep you engaged with life.

You examined the mindsets of people living in Norway during the cold, dark winter. What did you find?

In many countries, [seasonal affective disorder](#), or wintertime depression, is relatively common. But in Norway, rates of seasonal affective disorder are quite low, even though people experience some of the coldest, darkest winters on Earth. They thrive despite the extreme seasonal changes. And their ability to thrive in winter seems to be connected to their winter mindset.

Based on our upbringing or past experiences, we might have certain mindsets like “winter is dreadful”. But you can also view it as a cosy time, with lots of opportunity for recreation, and with lots of fascinating changes happening in nature. Many people in Norway have this [more positive winter mindset](#), and the more positively they viewed winter, the higher their life satisfaction and the better their mood. Interestingly, the further north people live, the more positive their winter mindset.

How did you change your own attitudes and behaviour while living in a place where the sun doesn't rise for two months every winter?

We tend to associate the polar night with darkness, but it also can be viewed as a soft, peaceful light rather than just a dark and depressing thing. And so I would go out and take walks, either with my headlamp or just with street lights. I also tried to do things inside; we hosted a lot of potlucks with friends and we had lots of holiday gatherings. It was much easier to love the winter in Tromsø, because the people around me loved winter.

Do you think that anyone can change their attitudes in this way?

One hundred per cent! Most people just don't realise that these beliefs are subjective. If you are someone who hates winter, you just think: “This is who I am, this is how I've always been, and there's nothing I can do about it.” But mindsets can be shaped in adaptive ways, and once you introduce the idea that mindsets exist and that you can control them, that understanding can be tremendously powerful.

“Understanding that mindsets exist and you can control them is tremendously powerful”

Can an understanding of mindset help us deal with the stresses arising from covid-19?

Let me first say that mindset is not a cure-all. There's a fricking global pandemic! People are out of work, and they can't visit family or take care of ageing relatives. That being said, we can make it harder for ourselves by really dwelling on all of the ways that it feels like the world is falling apart. Or we can see it as a time to lean in to some of the things that maybe we haven't had space or time for previously.

Has the experience of living in Tromsø helped you cope during the pandemic?

I think living in Norway was one of those positive stress experiences. It wasn't just living through the polar night that was stressful, it was moving to a new country where I didn't know anyone, where I didn't speak the language, and living in this environment that was so different for me. On hard days, I think to myself that if I could do that, I can do anything. And my time in Norway really taught me how to be by myself and to enjoy spending time home alone – lessons that made me well suited for being a homebody during the lockdown.

How to think positively in a pandemic winter

Winter can be a difficult season, and the covid-19 pandemic only adds to the stress. [Drawing on her own and other's research](#), Kari Leibowitz offers five steps to achieve a mindset that will help you meet these twin challenges.

1 Recognise the message behind your stress

We only become anxious when we care about something. “The stress response evolved to indicate what we value and then to pay attention to it,” says Leibowitz. Simply recognising that is better for us than wallowing in how bad we feel or trying to escape our feelings completely. It is the first crucial step to developing a healthier stress mindset. If, for example, you are anxious about not being able to see family members for long stretches of time, “take a moment to tap into what is the real core value underlying that stress”, she says. “In this case it's that I love my family, and I want my connection to them to be strong.”

2 Look for things you can control

Once you have recognised the values that underlie your stress, you can look for ways to act on them. The aim isn't to ignore the reality of the situation and the difficulties you may face, such as the danger of covid-19 and the risk of unemployment; [the evidence suggests this will only make things worse](#). “Thinking of stress as an opportunity to engage with your values doesn't mean that you have to deny those things are true. It just means that you are figuring out what parts of the situation are within your control,” says Leibowitz. If you are upset about not seeing your family, for example, you might look for other ways to express your love, such as sending a handwritten letter or a home-made gift.

3 Embrace small pleasures

In winter, it is easy to focus on all the things that we can't do, rather than acknowledging that the season itself can bring pleasures that would be difficult in summer, such as the cosiness of curling up under a blanket with a hot chocolate as we read a novel or watch our favourite TV series. “Look for the things that make winter special, that you would not be able to do at other times of the year,” says Leibowitz. This can [reduce the feelings of helplessness](#) that sometimes come with harsher weather.

4 Avoid being overambitious

Less travel and socialising during the covid-19 pandemic has freed up time for some people. However, Leibowitz is sceptical of the numerous media articles during its first wave encouraging people to use it to develop ambitious goals. “There was this sort of ‘hustle mentality’, like, it’s a global pandemic and so now’s the time to write your bestselling novel,” she says. “That’s garbage! Now is a crazy time to get things like that done.” If you are facing a winter with fewer opportunities to get out and socialise than you might like, you should have realistic aims, recognising ways to use the time constructively without putting yourself under additional pressure.

5 Watch what you talk about

During the winter months, moaning about the rain and cold reinforces a negative winter mindset, with a direct effect on your mood, says Leibowitz. It is important to share your feelings honestly, but if such negative chat becomes too much of a habit, try directing your conversations to some of the more positive ways you have been coping with winter’s challenges. “When you say something out loud, it really changes the way that you think about it and the things that you focus on,” she says. “I encourage people to be positive wintertime mindset ambassadors.”