

Beating the Winter Blues

By Marvin Zauderer

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You're dragging. You're cranky. And the weather may be blocking you from a key contributor to your usual mental health: riding. You may be suffering from the cyclist's winter blues, or perhaps something worse. The mentally fit cyclist chooses from a diverse array of tactics to battle the blues successfully and regain a strong sense of well-being.

Last month, continuing our series on Responding to Adversity, I discussed how you can [handle pressure in your cycling more effectively](#). This month, I explore **how to beat the "cyclist's winter blues,"** the fifth advanced skill of the mentally fit cyclist.

The onset of winter weather can wreak havoc on your cycling. Shorter days might make it harder to fit daytime rides into your schedule. Snow and rain may derail rides completely. And, after enough days peeking outside and then trudging into your garage, the sight of your trainer may turn you into a snarling mass of protoplasm.

And yet, if you're like many of us, your cycling is ordinarily a major player in your physical and emotional health, a regular part of what you do to maintain a healthy balance in your life. If your cycling takes a big hit during the winter, that balance can be shattered. Plus, even if you're lucky enough to live somewhere where winter has less of an effect on riding (hello, San Diego!), winter may still bring with it feelings of lethargy, irritability, and gloom. Whether you're cycling as much as usual or not, you may have the cyclist's winter blues.

The first step in overcoming the cyclist's winter blues is to be sure that's all it is. It's one thing to have a bit less energy than usual, a bit more crankiness than usual, and eye-rolling when you confront your trainer; we'll talk about what to do about all that shortly. It may be another thing, though, if you're feeling significantly lethargic, down, or anxious, if you're oversleeping or overeating (especially craving carbs), or if you're having trouble concentrating. If this has happened during more than one winter, you might have [Seasonal Affective Disorder \(SAD\)](#). First researched and named by [Dr. Normal Rosenthal](#), SAD can be treated effectively with regular exposure to bright light, medication, and/or psychotherapy.

If you have any of the above symptoms, and are also feeling a profound sense of hopelessness, have little interest or pleasure in doing things, or are feeling bad about yourself, you may have a more serious case of clinical depression. (Actually, even without any of these additional symptoms, you may have a more serious case of clinical depression.) To check that out, you might take the National Mental Health Association's [confidential online screening test, find a professional in your area](#) (unfortunately U.S.-only, at the moment) who conducts free, confidential, year-round depression screenings, or have an evaluation session with a [licensed psychotherapist](#). John Preston's book, [You Can Beat Depression](#), is an excellent resource. You may benefit from speaking with your personal physician about your symptoms, as they can also be caused by physical ailments (eg. hypothyroidism).

Breaking Away from the Blues

So let's assume you have the cyclist's blues, or will have them someday. Any form of depression, including the cyclist's blues, tends to act like quicksand on the mind and the body: it will try to convince you that contracting, withdrawing, and shutting down are the right things to do. But here's where you, once again, can use your mind on your mind. Are you going to sit in or attack? Attack! There are a variety of things you can do, including using your [five core skills](#), to break away from the hold the cyclist's blues has on you.

1. Use your trainer, or if you don't have one, get one. I know, I know, you start to go stir-crazy

when you're spinning for the umpteenth time. Here are some things you can do to spice things up:

- Set up an inexpensive TV/DVD combo near your trainer. Rent a TV series on DVD and watch all the episodes in order. Watch old Tour or Giro or Classics races. Rent those movies you've been meaning to watch. (Check out [Séamus King's list](#) of cycling-related movies.)
- Don't just spin. Do some intervals that you or your coach feel are appropriate for winter training. Although spinning, particularly if it bores you to tears, may provide a great opportunity for you to practice your [concentration skills](#).
- [Download some podcasts](#) and explore subjects that interest you.
- Invite a cycling buddy or two over, and ask them to bring their trainers. No need to worry about a group ride messing with your workout! C'mon, misery loves company.
- Speaking of which, don't view it as misery. As you know from the articles on [self-talk](#) and [managing emotions](#), your thoughts affect your feelings. So, look at being on the trainer in a positive way. I'm not suggesting that you try to delude yourself into believing you'll get the same pleasure as you do on a ride around Lake Como (although perhaps you could get a Lombardy DVD to simulate that), but I *am* suggesting you not view trainer time as a death march. So don't do the [Eric Clapton](#) thing and think, "give me one more day, please" as you look up mournfully into yet another stormy sky. Do the [Bob Dylan](#) thing as you look at your bike and think, "we'll meet again someday on the avenue." (OK, Clapton and Dylan were talking about women, but who's checking?)

2. Hunt around for any toxic beliefs. As long as you're examining your beliefs about riding on the trainer, look around in the dark recesses of your mind for any other distorted beliefs that might be sustaining your blues. For example: "If I don't train on the road now exactly as much as I'm supposed to, my upcoming season will be a complete bust. After all, Lance said the Tour is won in November, December, and January." [David Burns' books](#) are good resources here.

3. Be wary of comparisons. Particularly if you race, but even if you don't, comparisons are everywhere. To begin with, they're how we measure the outcomes of competition. And they play a big role – sometimes, too big – in how we evaluate our progress and performance. Are you stronger, faster, mentally tougher than that guy? Is that woman training harder than you? Would you be a better teammate than someone else? If you're comparing yourself with others too much, your well-being may be at their mercy. If you bring your comparisons back below threshold, you'll be generating more of your well-being from within: a powerful antidote to the cyclist's blues.

4. Re-evaluate your cycling goals. As noted in [the article on goal-setting and goal-management](#), goals often need to be reset after significant time off the bike. [Detraining](#), for example, often has a significant effect on goals. If you've been off the bike and your goals aren't reset, they're likely to be less achievable, which will tend to create underlying, unproductive anxiety. You're less likely to want to get on the bike if you're pursuing the wrong goals. And that can perpetuate the cyclist's winter blues.

5. Evaluate your diet and exercise routine. When we're feeling down, [something has changed](#) in our brain chemistry. What you eat and drink, along with the nature, frequency, and duration of your physical exercise, can move your brain chemistry back towards balance. Joel Robertson's book, [Natural Prozac](#), is a good reference on this topic. Yoga and indoor sports might be good, occasional alternatives for you whenever outdoor cycling is impossible.

6. Increase your tolerance for discomfort. Often we do need to do something about the cyclist's blues. But [as Sylvia Boorstein says](#), sometimes a good mantra is "Don't just do something, sit there!" When you learn to sit longer with your distress, and don't rush to "fix" it, you

may find that like all things it arises and passes away. Or you may find something surprising beneath it. As I mentioned in [the article on suffering](#), there are a number of ways in which you can increase your ability to not be thrown off-center by any kind of distress, including the kind you find on a tough climb.

7. Ensure you have cycling in its proper place in your life. As I explained in [the article on recovering from injury](#), if cycling is providing too much of your well-being, identity, and/or self-worth, you may be out of balance. Check in with yourself on this one.

8. Be grateful. Increasingly, [research](#) is proving that gratitude can contribute profoundly to happiness and well-being. You can choose to be angry about what you don't have, or grateful for what you do have. Pay it forward.

9. Express yourself. Whether it's talking with someone or expressing your thoughts, feelings, and sensations on your own – through journaling, songwriting, painting, and the like – “metabolizing” the blues through some kind of expression may be the fastest way to be rid of them. The [article on Communication](#) gives some suggestions on how to remove obstacles and communicate more freely.

As blues legend John Lee Hooker [sang in The Healer](#), “Blues a healer/all over the world/It healed me, it can heal you.”



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