



## Winter stories:

Therapeutic conversations from the land of ice and snow

by Julie Tilsen



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### Abstract

People living in colder climates often diagnose themselves with ‘winter depression’ or ‘seasonal affective disorder’ when they experience sadness, low energy, fatigue and other difficulties that they attribute to the cold and dark days of winter. There are limitations to locating these problems only in bodily and medical discourses and ignoring the culture-bound ways these discourses are constructed and circulated through the kinds of stories we tell about winter. I use a narrative approach to these problems, inviting people to remember their childhood relationships with winter, and to situate their experiences in context, thus making new ways forward possible. When their childhood winter stories become available, people reconnect with a history that helps them construct preferred relationships with winter.

**Key words:** *winter depression; seasonal affective disorder (SAD); childhood stories; deconstruction; discourse; narrative practice*

'Julie!' my mom yells with a combination of urgency and amusement. 'Come put a hat on if you're going to stand there and watch your father do that. It's below zero!' I'm six years old, standing in the dark of night (6 o'clock – the days are short in December) on our back patio, watching my dad spray the skating rink he's built in our yard with a fresh coat of soon-to-be-ice from the garden hose that's attached to the spigot in the basement (attaching it outside wouldn't work for what should be obvious reasons). Oh, and that's zero degrees Fahrenheit – it's well below zero Celsius.<sup>1</sup> My little legs march my clunky boots over to the back door, and as I accept the thick woollen hat from my mom, she reaches to zip up my bulky down jacket (I raced out of the house not wanting to miss my dad at work – no time to zip up!). She gives my chopper mitts a tug so that they rest more snugly on my hands. 'Don't stay out too long' is her obligatory comment as she shuts the door tightly. I turn to watch my dad make magic come out of the green tube, illuminated by the porch light and my enchantment with the entire process.

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## Welcome to the great white north

I live and work just under the forty-fifth parallel – 44.9778 degrees north to be exact. Here in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on the traditional lands of the Dakota and Ojibwe peoples, our winters are legendary. With the Earth tilted such that our spot on the planet is farthest from the sun, daylight is precious. Full of magic and beauty, the months of shorter days also bring wicked cold (January temps can settle into the single digits above zero Fahrenheit, while wind chills plummet as low as -40F and beyond). Snow can pile up higher than my waist.

The identity of Minnesotans is uniquely wrapped up in our conspicuous relationship with winter. It's a relationship ripe with contradictions and extremes: on one hand, our legitimacy as 'Real Minnesotans' grows by how many degrees below zero Fahrenheit it is when we bike/walk/run outside. On the other hand, we can spend an entire afternoon house-bound bingeing on the latest Netflix series and the pizza and cheesy bread we ordered for delivery as we hibernate under layers of blankets on our couches, cursing the cost of a tropical vacation. We scoff at people from neighbouring states as they struggle with their puny winters while we complain about never feeling warm. We embrace winter with ice sculpture contests, polar plunges, outdoor festivals and art installations on frozen lakes. We wonder

why we live here while simultaneously pulling on our 'Bold North' t-shirts.

These contradictions and tensions have existed for as long as I can remember (I am a 57-year-old born-and-bred Minnesotan), and contribute to the complexity of a Minnesotan's identity: because we believe that we handle the cold better than anyone, we're the only ones who get to complain about it. Over the years, these complaints have become increasingly influenced by and situated within medicalised discourses. Some people I work with attribute problems such as feelings of sadness, lack of interest or motivation, low energy, fatigue and increased sleep, and an overall sense of unwellness to 'winter depression', an all-too-common colloquial term. Some people diagnose themselves with what the psychiatric community calls seasonal affective disorder (SAD).<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I discuss the limitations of locating these experiences only within psychiatric and bodily discourses and ignoring other discourses that shape people's experiences. I show how a narrative approach deconstructs dominating discourses and ushers in possibilities for winter stories rich in wonder, warmth and gratitude. Using narrative therapy, I explore the themes of childhood wonder versus expectations of adulthood, disconnect from nature, and our relationship with darkness and introspection.

Two points of clarification before proceeding. First, the people I meet with who struggle with winter depression are not endangered by Minnesota's harsh winters: they have stable housing and are well-enough resourced to afford more than their basic needs, including appropriate clothing and transportation to negotiate our, at-times, arctic temperatures. Second, in deconstructing the discourse of SAD and situating it within broader cultural contexts such as capitalism, I am not refuting the physiological processes<sup>3</sup> that contribute to people's troubled experiences with winter. My non-medicalised approach does not disregard experiences of the body and the influence of biological processes; rather, it is an effort to expand beyond attending to *only* the medical discourse and to avoid totalising accounts. Also, it's important to consider the body, and its responses to winter, in historical and cultural context. By considering a range of discourses that influence people's experiences and how they make meaning of them, we situate medical/biological accounts in culture and expose their contingencies. This makes it possible for people to make new and multiple meanings of, and responses to, their embodied experiences.

## From winter woes to childhood wonder

Very few people seek me out *because* they are dealing with winter depression, but many of the people I see during the fall and winter months do raise this as a problem that either overtakes or exacerbates the original concerns that led them to seek therapy.

After people describe their troubled relationships with winter, I ask their permission to take a conversational detour away from the problem story. I assure them that we will return to the problem and what is currently causing concern for them. I explain that I am also interested in the history of their relationship with winter, and thus I would like to hear some of their childhood winter stories. Together, we negotiate when and how to do this; often, we end up tacking back and forth between the history of the problem and the trouble it's causing, and the history of the person's relationship with winter. For purposes of clarity, in this paper I separate these two aspects of the conversation.

Why am I interested in seeking their childhood stories of winter? First, I am interested in unpacking the culture-bound ways contemporary neoliberal society has constructed SAD and winter depression and therapeutic responses to these problems. I wonder, how do the stories that circulate in contemporary American society about experiences known as 'SAD' and 'winter depression' reflect and perpetuate prevailing social norms and assumptions? If we had different stories about people's relationships with, and responses to, winter, might we have different ways to approach any problems that arise? In search of different stories, I turn to childhood for a different context.

I began with a hunch based on my experience of having once been a child, and now having relationships with children, that these stories would contain very different accounts of winter. Children typically love winter. I became interested in hearing from people about what aspects of their childhood relationships with winter they might want to reclaim or remember, and how these might be resources in standing up to their current troubles. If meaningful winter stories from years past were made available, I suspected that people might experience some discursive space from the problem story, and thus open up new ways forward. By contrasting childhood stories with the discourses that influence adulthood, we position ourselves dialogically to situate the problems of adulthood within alternative discursive contexts, ones that expand beyond the medicalised discourse of SAD.

Enquiring about preferred aspects or times in someone's life in order to bring forward alternative stories, knowledges, skills and preferences has precedents in narrative practice. For example, Freeman, Epston & Lobovits (1997), and Marsten, Epston & Markham (2016) suggested a practice of working with children that begins with meeting the young person outside of the problem story. Madigan and Winslade (2017) described relationship therapy that opens with a re-membering conversation (Hedtke, 2002, 2003) about the couple's pre-conflict relationship.

To make this shift in the conversation, I ask people, 'Can you tell me what your relationship with winter was like when you were young? When you were four, eight or 10, perhaps?' This question almost always evokes some sort of response that immediately transports people back in time to a period when they were in love with winter. These conversations conjure memories and stories of skating, sledding, snowball fights, walking on frozen lakes, snow forts and snowmen, story time by the fire, hockey exploits, hot chocolate (and lots of marshmallows), sleigh rides, cosy cabins, blowing soap bubbles that freeze (try it!), learning to ski and eating icicles (yes, we all did that as kids). More than the activities, what resonates most about the stories people tell when I enquire about the winters of their childhood are their feelings of enchantment, their sense of wonder, and their enthusiasm for the season.

Here are some of the questions I ask to invite stories from, and about, people's childhood relationships with winter:

- What was your relationship with winter like when you were a child?
- What did you look forward to about winter? What were some of your favourite things about winter?
- Can you share a particular winter story about one of your most cherished experiences as a child?
- What do you think it is about childhood that made it possible to be in love with winter?
- Is this capacity for loving winter something that only children and young people have?
- How did your relationship with winter compare to your relationship with other seasons?
- What did you notice about how the adults in your life supported your relationship with winter? Did they encourage or discourage it? Participate with you in it? Help make it possible?

The responses to this line of enquiry have been amazing to witness, not only in regard to the stories people tell, but also the joy and enthusiasm with which they tell them. My hunch was right: when asked what their relationship with winter was like as a child, people lighten up, a smile rolls across their face and stories full of wonder and delight, friendship and family, fun and meaning fill the room. As people reflect on the disconnect between their childhood memories and their current struggles, they entertain doubts about their previously held certainty that SAD is primarily a biological response to darkness, or a condition located in their body that they have no effect on. This opens space to consider other understandings of their experiences and possible responses to them. Reclaimed winter stories also carry preferred identities and practices for people to access in their adult lives.

Through their childhood winter stories, my clients reconnect with many winter activities and practices that they had previously said goodbye to. In doing so, they generate alternative ways to respond to three problem areas that repeatedly show up in people's accounts of winter depression: capitalist culture's expectations of adulthood, disconnection from nature, and a strained relationship with darkness and introspection.

Below are some of the ways people have reclaimed their relationships with winter and reconciled their struggles in those three areas.

- Jessie, aged 26, retrieved his ice skates from his parents' basement and took up skating for the first time in eight years. Because of his work schedule, Jessie mostly skates at night, in the deepest cold under the lights at the rink. Jessie told me he had 'come to love the quiet of night – I can think and be contemplative in ways that I can't during the day'. He re-named SAD 'seasonal activity desire' because 'it reminds me that when I feel down in winter, it's because I want to be doing things, not because I can't handle the cold. I skated all the time as a kid. I stopped when I went away to college on the West Coast and never thought about starting again when I came home three years ago. I think I forgot for a minute what I know about how to do winter in Minnesota, and how to enjoy it'.
- Bri joined a social group for queer people interested in outdoor activities. The first outing they went on was a three-mile hike in 15 degree Fahrenheit weather. After this, Bri established a 'walk-a-day' plan for themselves ('it's not like I didn't have to walk to school every day as a kid, no matter the temperature!'). Inspired by their own

childhood winter story, Bri also bought a sled and snow pants 'because I don't think anything has ever made me smile like flying down a hill on a sled does. I can't believe I forgot this'. They decided to try snowshoeing, noting that 'being outside has always been important to me. I can't say I love nature if I don't accept it on its terms. I don't have to love the cold when I'm waiting for the bus or shovelling a foot of snow, but I'm finding I feel it differently when I'm doing something I enjoy'.

- Kelly set up her grandmother's old sewing machine in her living room so that she would have a meaningful creative activity to do on cold nights after work. As she shared her childhood story, Kelly remembered that 'my parents always kept stuff around for us to do when it was really cold – colouring books, games, puzzles, books. We played outside a lot, but there was also an emphasis on what we could do indoors, too'. She also hung some decorative lights and put candles around the room 'to make it a space I liked being in'.<sup>4</sup> And Kelly started cooking. This replaced 'watching re-runs of cooking shows and feeling miserable about not going out. Now, I'm focusing more on liking staying in, rather than hating going out. I guess I'm reclaiming a desire for indoor activity and a cosy, comfortable space as a way to get through winter'.

As people remember and reclaim their childhood winter stories, they cultivate more complex relationships with winter, relationships in which they can acknowledge both the challenges and the possibilities of the season. The stories of their childhood relationships with winter offer alternative resources to challenge the problem stories they are encountering in adulthood. Through these stories, people come to respect their younger selves' abilities to embrace winter and appreciate the season's unique offerings. Telling their childhood stories of winter leads people to question the pathologising practice of locating problems in themselves. It also has them entertaining doubt that the problem is located in Minnesota's epic winters.

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The vacant lot between my house and our neighbours' was unclaimed territory that felt a world away to me and the other kids on the block; it was a place that adults didn't go, a place of adventure and possibility where we explored and created year round. This vast space featured two white pine trees (a type of 'evergreen' conifer tree) that, to my 11-year-old

eyes, were enormous. Every winter, these members of nature's royalty shouldered snow on their long boughs, making the perfect fort for hiding from the adult world while sipping hot chocolate (loaded up with too many marshmallows) from a thermos and stockpiling snowballs to be deployed at a later date.

'We need to fortify the fort!' declares Kip, my friend who lives on the other side of the lot. Quickly, we get busy transforming some of our snowballs into snow boulders which become walls along the perimeter of the trees. Ignoring the calls of parents from both sides of our field of dreams (can they even be sure that we can hear them way out here, so far from home?), we begin to make a snowman (in 1973 I did not have the gender analysis to call it anything else) who will serve as our fort mascot. The trees provide us with pine cones and small branches they've released to the ground – these make fine facial features and limbs for our frosty comrade, and dried red needles work great as hair.

Eventually, Kip's mom makes tracks up to the threshold of our fort, and as she speaks, it's as though her words break the spell and we're forced back into the mundane world where people worry about getting cold and wet. 'Hey, you two arctic explorers', her voice enters from the other side of the green branches and snow boulders, 'you've been out here over an hour. Time to come in and warm up a bit'. Kip and I argue only briefly. Our thermos is empty, and we know that part of the fun of playing in the cold is experiencing the warmth when we're back inside.

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### *Unpacking SAD: Out of the body and into the discourse*

After telling childhood stories, people often feel more hopeful and enthusiastic about winter. Although they may be interested in taking up activities that they'd moved away from, they still have concerns that they attribute to winter and that need attention. We return to having experience-near (Geertz, 1976) conversations about their problems. I say, 'now that I've heard a bit about your childhood relationship with winter, what more would you like to tell me about how this relationship is for you as an adult?'

Often, people's descriptions of the problem reflect the common refrain of seasonal affective disorder. They attribute their hatred of winter, feelings of 'depression' and lack of motivation to darkness and

cold temperatures. These troubles start in mid- to late-fall and continue through the winter months, which means here in Minnesota, people might experience these problems from mid-October through April. Sometimes, people name these difficulties SAD whether or not a doctor or other therapist has diagnosed them.

In fact, the discourse of SAD, like many medicalised discourses, has breached the boundaries of professional naming practices – that is, diagnosis – and entered everyday language. This discourse relies on limited accounts of people's relationships with winter, a single story about physiological responses to darkness. This naturalises the problems by locating them in bodies and decontextualises them from the social and political world. Positioning biology outside of culture or discourse renders it immutable and totalising. With the power and authority of the medical establishment behind it, the discourse of SAD inhibits people from asking questions that unhinge its certainty and fixity, and thus inhibits imagining or creating responses that come from outside of psychiatric discourse.

When we venture outside of this single and dominating discourse, we can consider that pathologising the body's responses to the colder, darker months invites a variety of questions. For example, why do we find pathology in these bodily responses but not in others? When did this begin? Is this done across time and place? Who benefits and who suffers from this understanding? What contextual factors that affect these experiences and the meanings made of them might we consider? How do prevailing cultural stories about these responses (e.g., SAD and winter depression) affect how we understand and story these responses?

Historians have documented (Robb, 2007) the ways that people living in colder climates prior to the industrial revolution engaged in a kind of semi-hibernation. For example, in France, workers essentially took the entire winter off, as did the peasant workers of north-western Russia. Prior to colonisation, the indigenous peoples of what is now the northern region of North America adjusted their lifestyles to the frigid temperatures and frozen landscape. They did not expect to carry on the same kind or degree of activity during the winter that they did during the other seasons. And they saw the natural world as something they were part of, not as something to control or conquer as is the case in contemporary capitalism. These examples illustrate the historical and cultural contingencies of people's relationships with and responses to winter.

The medical community has no definitive answer as to why we have the bodily responses that we do in winter. The general consensus is it has to do with the effects of decreased sunlight on serotonin, melatonin and circadian rhythms (Nordqvist, 2017). In regard to the common complaint of food cravings and over-eating, some researchers think it's a throwback to a time when humans needed extra body fat; others believe that feeling cold triggers the desire to eat because food warms the body (de Castro, 1991; Ma et al., 2006).

Regardless of the physiological processes, I'm interested in situating the meanings people make of their bodily responses in culture. In other words: what are the stories we tell about what our bodies are doing, and how do these stories affect us? During the winter months in Minnesota, not a day goes by when I don't hear people in casual conversation talking about 'having winter depression', 'craving and eating more food' and 'wanting to sleep all day'. I don't dispute these embodied experiences (I have them too, sometimes), but I am curious about the effects of repeating these stories to ourselves so frequently.

What does it look like when we approach SAD, or winter depression, from a narrative perspective? As with any concern that people bring to therapy, I am interested in understanding the history of the problem, what kinds of trouble it makes and for whom, and what the problem requires of the person in order for it to continue to make trouble. In my conversations with people who report dreading the onset of winter and feeling immobilised once it's arrived, I often begin by asking questions that deconstruct and make visible the assumptions undergirding the notion of winter depression, or more generally, the idea that their experience is attributable only to unsituated biological processes. Below are some of the questions I've asked:

- How did you learn about SAD? What about that makes sense or fits for your experience?
- What's been helpful about having this way to describe your experience? What has been problematic about it?
- If you didn't know SAD was a thing, how would you describe the problem and the trouble it's making? What would you call it?
- What are some of the difficulties you associate with winter depression that have led to this dread? What kind of troubles does this make for you?
- Are these troubles that only come during the winter months? How do you respond to these or similar

troubles if they show up during the spring, summer or fall?

- What have these troubles done to convince you that they're only or mostly problems of winter?
- How come these problems of winter depression seem mostly to target adults? Do children have special powers that protect them?
- How does SAD convince you that what you experience means there's something wrong with you? With your body? Your health?
- Is it possible that slowing down and sleeping more when it's dark and cold could mean your body is working okay?
- Do you think it's realistic to go at things as hard and fast when it's super cold and snowy out as when it's 70 degrees and sunny? How have you become convinced of this? What's behind the idea that we should expect year-round ease and comfort here in the north?
- Where does the pressure you feel to get to work on time during a snow storm come from? What's being valued and what's being devalued when being on time to work is prioritised over your safety?
- If you could imagine away cars and driving in the winter, how much of what contributes to your bad mood, fatigue and lack of motivation would still be around?
- Is darkness a problem at other times of the year? What ways of relating to darkness do you have that stories of winter depression get you to forget?

I engage with earnest curiosity in an effort to invite an experience-near description of what is making trouble for people. People's embrace of the SAD diagnosis and the ubiquitousness of winter depression stories present a double-edged sword. On one hand, people use the language of SAD because it legitimises their suffering. On the other hand, because of the hegemonic status medical discourse holds, people often assume that the diagnosis tells us everything we need to know. This can be a barrier to an experience-near description. When people come in using the terminology of the psychiatric/medical field (in this case, the diagnosis and discourse of SAD), I don't try to 'talk them out of' this understanding; rather, I am first interested in finding out what this language (and the discourse that informs it) makes possible and what it prohibits (i.e., what are the effects of this discourse?). I invite descriptions of their experiences in their own language by asking them to imagine that they've never heard of SAD, depression

or any of the other medicalised terms they're using to explain the problems they're having. This leads to experience-near descriptions unfettered by medical language and rich in people's own language, metaphors and meanings.

Because we've already had the conversation about the history of their relationship with winter, these childhood stories are available as we deconstruct the discourses of SAD and winter depression. These remembered stories become discursive resources for pointing to possibilities of *what could be* based on *what has been*. I ask questions such as:

- How do you account for the change in your relationship with winter from when you were a child to now?
- Is the fun and magic you had during winter as a child lost forever? Is it a requirement of adulthood to disavow enjoyment of winter?
- Does being adult cause you to lose your enjoyment of other seasons?
- Have there been times when your younger self convinces you to take a break from the expectations of adulthood and have a little fun with winter? What happened?
- When do people age out of loving winter? Is this a biological process, something that's 'natural' and unavoidable?
- Do you think winters have become colder and harsher since you were little?<sup>5</sup> What made it possible for you as a child to have this warm relationship with the cold months?
- Who inspired your love of winter and/or these particular activities? How might they advise you about the problems of winter depression?
- What suggestions might your younger self make to help you get up and not feel so down during winter?

### *From psychiatric disorder to a problem in context*

What are the responses to these lines of enquiry? While the range of responses is as varied as the number of people I've talked with, there are a few themes that tend to emerge when clients and I explore their experiences and we deconstruct the assumptions that uphold the totalising medicalised story.

Similarities between the problems that they experience during the winter months and those that make trouble for them other times of years emerge through our conversation. Acknowledging that they have experienced some version of the problem at other times does two things: first, it opens up space to recruit the resources they've used before in response to this problem; second, it unhinges the certainty that the problems are only winter related, or due to SAD or winter depression. By unhinging the problem from a single discourse, we make multiple discourses available to inform meaningful responses, acts of resistance and solutions (Strong, Ross & Sesma-Vazquez, 2015).

Uncertainty about the discourses of SAD and winter depression also emerges in these conversations. When we take a closer look at how the dominant story of winter depression operates in a totalising way, one which obfuscates other factors that contribute to problems, people become interested in and open to other ways to make meaning of their winter experiences.

For example, Patrick told me that he was 'taking winter depression in stride, it's just what happens in January in Minnesota'. I was curious about what winter depression involved, as well as what led him to reconcile himself to its inevitability. As Patrick described in greater detail his experiences, he talked about not having any energy after 'working a full day' in his new job, having trouble getting out of bed, 'eating too many carbs' and missing going out with friends during the week. As it turned out, this job (which Patrick took right out of university) was his first 'full-time, nine-to-five adult job'. I asked how a 'full-time, nine-to-five adult job' changed things for him, and he said it 'makes it hard to have time for things I enjoy and seeing friends – lots of them are still in school and work different hours and have more flexible schedules'. This led him to question whether 'it's learning how to have a full-time job that's kicking my butt, not winter'.

Creating this doubt about the veracity of the SAD discourse allowed Patrick to position himself in relationship to a different problem, which opened up room for different responses. Instead of focusing on 'how to manage my winter depression' (his initial intention in therapy), he became interested in 'making sure I don't lose myself to work'. Resisting 'losing himself to work' was both a narrative and a cause that inspired Patrick – he was committed to challenging the effects of capitalism. With the problem no longer located only in his body's response to winter, Patrick felt equipped to respond to the difficulties he was experiencing.

Patrick also considered his newly situated understanding of his struggles alongside his childhood stories of winter. His childhood stories centred around 'family and food' and winter traditions that included 'a lot of helping my parents in the kitchen and sitting around eating and playing games inside'. Patrick decided to enlist his housemates and friends to 'establish some new winter traditions' that reflected his adult interests and values. Together with his friends, Patrick established a weekly game and soup night 'to get us through the thick of winter by having something to look forward to and break the isolation'.

Finally, Patrick begun journaling and drawing. He said, 'I got so wrapped up complaining about cold, long, dark nights and not going anywhere. After talking about what would it take to be with the darkness, I decided to turn into it, not away from it'.

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'Oh my god, that ramp is huge!' I unroll my sled (a flat, flexible six-foot piece of plastic with a handhold at one end and a slippery finish on the bottom). As I survey the slope of the hill I stand atop, my friends are doing the same alongside me. Prior to our arrival, and sometime after yesterday's dumping of 10 inches of fresh snow, some industrious person(s) built a ramp three-quarters of the way down the hill. After what's likely been over 100 runs, the ramp is shiny, slick and icy hard. I'm not thrilled about going over it, but I know that I can't avoid doing so: no self-respecting Minnesota 16-year-old would show up at what's known as 'suicide hill' to go sledding and then back out. I sit down on the cold plastic, grab the handhold and curl the front end towards me.

'Don't you want to go down on your stomach?' Brian asks as he kneels on his sled a few feet away, preparing for his own run. 'I don't know', I shrug. 'You're the physics genius. Do you think that's best?' 'You might stay on better', he says with cautious confidence.

I lay down on my belly and push off. The well-worn path partners well with gravity and I whiz down the hill. Under my thin sled, I feel every bump in my internal organs as I zoom towards the ramp. I scream. I hit the ramp and fly what feels like 30 feet forward and 10 feet high. From the top of the hill, I hear the laughter of my friends as I land armpit-deep in the snowy field. I watch my sled finish the run without me. Laughing and groaning at the same time, I get up, retrieve my sled and make the climb to the top as Brian takes off, sitting upright on his sled.

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## Warming up to winter

'I have to tell you', Ashley chuckled as she walked into my office, kicking snow off her boots as she sat down. 'Since we talked a couple of weeks ago, I'm kind of warming up to winter.'

Ashley went on to say that 'although I still feel cold to my bones and like the living dead coming home in the dark at 5 o'clock, I think I've unfairly made winter out to be a villain'. I asked her what led her to reconsider winter's innocence. She explained that after remembering her childhood winter stories (snowshoeing in the woods, making paper snowflakes and eating snow cones her grandpa made from snow in their yard) she 're-thought the assumptions I had about winter depression'. Ashley said she found it 'deeply moving' to reflect on how the expectations of adulthood had taken her away from nature, something she felt a passionate connection to. 'I don't blame winter anymore when I feel depressed or crabby. It's not that simple. Winter's gonna winter; it's people who build roads and drive cars and expect to control the climate so it's always 72 degrees and sunny.'

Ashley's newly cultivated responses to the effects of winter included 'not fighting how I feel; if I'm tired and want to go to bed at 9 o'clock, I go to bed at 9 o'clock. I don't expect to have the same experiences I have in July when it's 85 degrees out and it's not dark until after 10 o'clock'. She also made snow cones – for the first time in 20 years – and served them as dessert when friends came over for dinner. 'I would never have done that before you and I talked about winter memories. At dinner, my friends all got into talking about their winter memories from when they were kids, too. It was fun and got everyone a little less stressed about winter.'

Using a narrative approach to people's struggles with SAD and winter depression allows me to listen for what discourse(s) the problem description fits into. By finding an alternative to the grand narratives of medicine and psychiatry, clients and I can recast problems in ways that foster personal meaning-making and give rise to new identity conclusions and unique outcomes. Along the way, the winter stories from people's childhood invite them to reach back to their past to find a history to inform a brighter and warmer future of winters to come.



## Notes

1. Zero degrees Fahrenheit is equal to -18 degrees Celsius.
2. As with any psychiatric diagnosis, there are criteria that 'qualify' one for the SAD diagnosis. Professionals who work in this area make a distinction between experiences that meet these criteria and those that do not. I am not interested in these distinctions as I am not committed to diagnoses, 'accurate' or otherwise. Instead, I am interested in Foucault's (1978) notions of biopower – the state subjugation and control of bodies – and how diagnoses operate in this way, in particular when people self-diagnose and collapse problems on to their bodies and identities.
3. Medical professionals have yet to determine the cause of winter SAD. Possible causes are related to the reduction in light during winter months. This can disrupt the body's circadian rhythm, drop serotonin levels and unbalance melatonin levels. These factors affect mood, energy and sleep.
4. In Scandinavian cultures, there is a tradition of creating warm and cosy spaces and embracing the darkness in winter. The Danish, in particular, have cultivated these practices and use the Norwegian word *hygge* (which translates to 'wellbeing') to describe the experience of feeling safe, warm, cosy and connected to close friends and family. It is associated with drinking hot beverages, lighting candles and fireplaces, Christmas, playing board games, eating seasonal sweet treats, cooking and reading books (Day, 2018).
5. In fact, Minnesota is one of the fastest warming states in the U.S. Our winters have warmed five degrees Fahrenheit since 1970 according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Popovich & Migliozi, 2018).

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