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## Sensory Solutions to the Seasonal Blues

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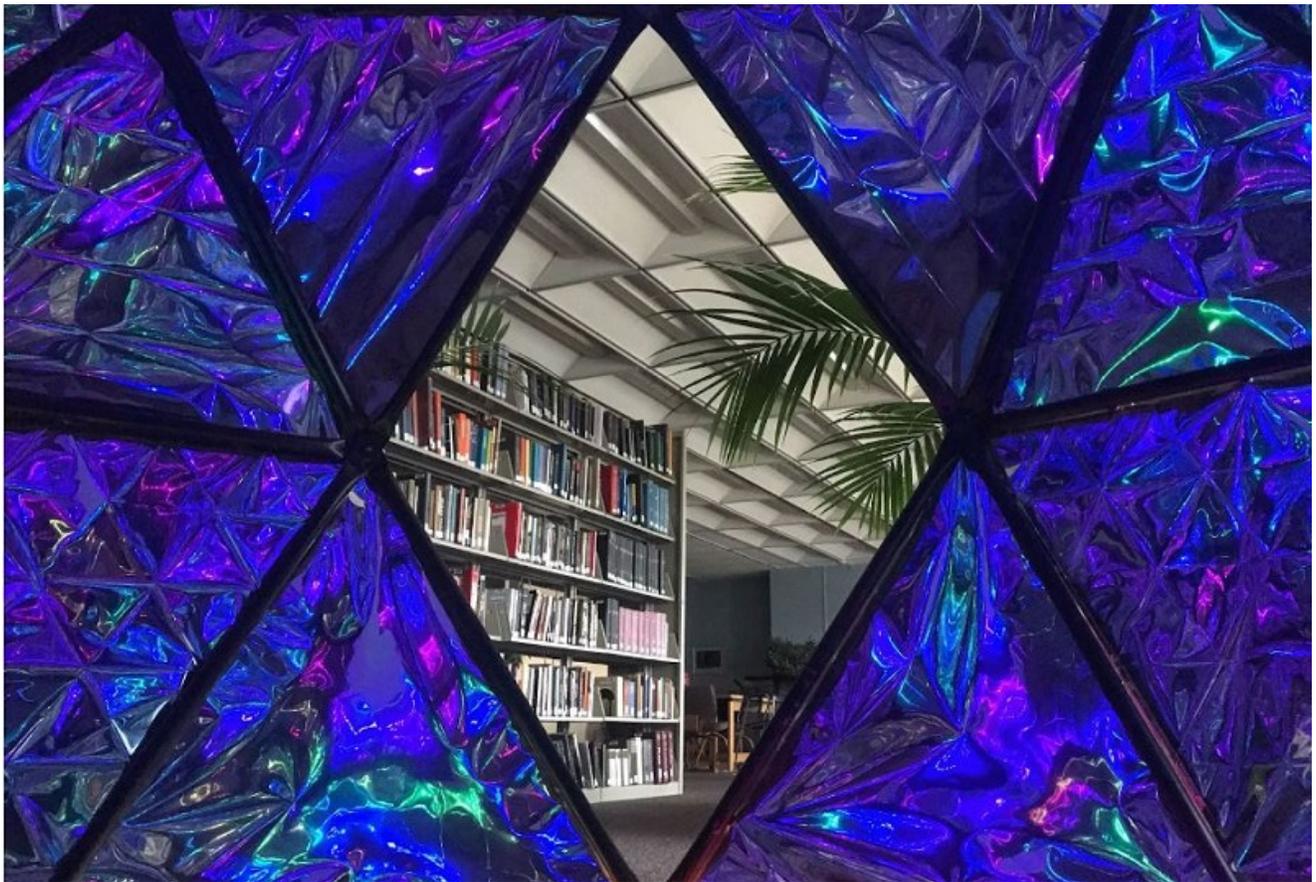
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# Sensory Solutions to the Seasonal Blues

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Monday December 5, 2022

By Melanie Fields

Winter is here, and with these colder and darker days upon us, it can sometimes be difficult to keep one's inner light burning. Seasonal affective disorder (SAD), commonly known as the winter blues, has the power to wreak havoc upon our energy levels and mood, in turn adding stress to our academic and work life, personal relationships and more. For those who are extra sensitive to this shift in light and weather, it can be quite a challenge to take care of one's own mental and emotional well-being, especially when there's less opportunity to spend time outdoors and in nature.

Forced indoors for the months ahead, it is especially important to recognize the power that our residence hall rooms, offices, homes and other spaces have in contributing to or relieving the effects of the winter blues. The Zen Den — more than just an immersive art installation in Roesch Library — represents a design aesthetic focused on promoting mindfulness through

the heightened experience of one's senses. Many of its basic elements can be applied to almost any environment and may help improve one's overall well-being through the winter season and beyond.

By cultivating a deeper awareness of how our surroundings influence our moods and states of mind, we are better able to shape these spaces to fit our own physical, mental and emotional needs. Below are some comforting and creative suggestions for how to honor each of your senses and practice self-care in the spaces in which you spend the most time.

## Sight

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Two visual elements come into play with our sense of sight.

- **Light:** One of the most important yet often overlooked elements of a space is the type of lighting it receives. Many health benefits are associated with exposure to natural sunlight, including vitamin D production, improved sleep and increased serotonin levels, which help boost mood. For those who live and work in dimly lit spaces or primarily under artificial light, it can be difficult to receive the recommended doses in the winter — around 30 minutes of direct exposure several times a week. One potential solution could be a light therapy lamp. Most models can fit discreetly on one's desk or countertop. Using one of these lamps for a little bit each day can help to supplement available sunlight and help to boost one's mood and energy levels.
- **Color:** The colors that dominate a space can play into the psychology of the space. Determining the types of colors that we have a strong affinity for and incorporating more of them into our surroundings is an essential part of designing our ideal environment. Learn more about the [symbolism of your favorite colors](#).

In places like offices or residence hall rooms, bland or neutral shades often prevail. Small design choices with big impacts include incorporating artwork or other decor items. A great cost-effective option for filling the space on an empty wall is a large vibrant print or tapestry featuring a scenic natural photograph or other image that resonates with you. Whether ocean, mountains, a forest or a special place you visited once while traveling, a meaningful scene can function as a window of sorts to help transport you to your “happy place” whenever you need a bit of an escape. Spend some time contemplating the mood or vibe you most want to feel in your space and then focus on which colors, images and types of scenery could create the desired feeling.

## Smell

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The olfactory sense is in fact the oldest and the most important way many creatures interact with their surroundings. For humans, our sense of smell can often serve as a potent gateway into our memories and emotions, where different scents evoke a variety of feelings. There are many ways to incorporate enjoyable scents into our spaces, from candles to room sprays

to essential oil diffusers. Learning the fragrances for which you have the strongest affinity can be an exciting process of self discovery. When incorporating new scents into your environment, be courteous of others' smell sensitivities if you share a common space.

## Sound

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Take a few moments to listen to the common sounds of your work or living space. What kind of noises prevail? Oftentimes, our spaces may be more communal than we would like and it is easy to get distracted (and bombarded) by the cacophony outside of our control. Beyond blocking out sound altogether, one solution which can help ease the inner dissonance resulting from noisier environments is to incorporate a calming form of background noise. This could be something as simple as using headphones to play your favorite music or even incorporating a calming sound object into your space like the peaceful trickling of a water fountain or the soothing vibrations of a small singing bowl. Explore what kinds of sounds resonate with you the most so that you can tune in to them when you feel distracted or overwhelmed.

## Touch

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Touch is the first sense that a baby develops in the womb, and it continues to play a key role in survival and our experience of the world as we develop throughout life. This constant tactile connection we have to our surroundings can either enhance or diminish levels of comfort — whether in our furniture, our clothing or the textures of the items in our spaces. Incorporating more soothing items and textures into our spaces — such as a plush blanket or even comfy slippers to wear in the office, can ease physical, mental or emotional discomfort. Another option to ease stress and anxiety and improve focus could be the use of a fidget toy. *Forbes Health* recommends a variety of different options.

## Important consideration

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Thank you for taking a journey through your senses to learn some tips and tricks to improve your surroundings and jump-start a few self-care practices this winter.

And remember: If you are suffering from severe seasonal affective disorder or any other ongoing strains on your mental health, please seek help from a professional health care provider.

— *Melanie Fields is a library specialist in the Marian Library and the creator of the Zen Den.*