For those of you who do not know what [SAD](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad/) is, count your blessings. It is a form of depression that makes its presence felt (usually) in winter and in varying degrees of severity. On a descending scale I have seen the severity levels categorised as

1. Thriving
2. Surviving
3. Struggling
4. Drowning

Describing SAD, or for that matter depression, to people who don’t go through it is difficult. “A child doesn’t understand a hammer until he’s mashed his finger at a nail”. A friend described it as losing the concept of happiness. They knew they had been happy in the past it was now a word to which no meaning could be attached. On a more positive note, when you come out of it there’s the “sudden realisation I felt like me again” at the end of it!

For SAD sufferers the external stresses forced on us by COVID certainly present additional straws for the donkey’s back.

* Loss of or separation from loved ones
* Fears about job security and all that entails
* Stress over the business decisions that would usually be rare occurrences (furloughs, redundancies and business survival)
* Extraverts forced to live an introverted way of life

There is no cure for SAD as such but there are coping strategies, habits to acquire that help. For more severe cases, antidepressant medication. It is the habits and coping strategies I found useful that I should like to share with you.

## How can you spot a SAD sufferer?

* Unless you know someone well you probably can’t.
* Unless you are looking for it you probably won’t
* Unless they feel safe telling you then you probably won’t

On the latter point if a SAD sufferer feels unsafe, they will be masking like crazy, even overcompensating for it. No-one wants to be thought of as a child of a lesser God.

As a SAD sufferer there is a sense of borrowing from my future self to maintain performance and outward appearances in the present.

Fortunately, a lot of work has taken place over the last few years to educate people and destigmatise depression and mental health issues. It is far easier to open up these days.

Easier is not the same as easy. However, this new openness will reveal just how many friends and colleagues have fought or are fighting their demons. For me this perspective and shared experience helped me more than anything else.

## What have I found to be helpful in dealing with SAD?

I use all the techniques described below. Some are more effective than others. All take time before the benefits begin to show. Some may work for you, others may not or you may have alternative approaches that work for you. You are the important part. What works for you works for you.

If you had shown me the list below when I was struggling the most, I wouldn’t have been able to absorb it. It took me a long time, a crisis point and external help to find what worked for me.

### Light, especially daylight

You can’t control the daylight but you can control what you do with what is available.

Working from home under COVID has given me more control over my time. I am not constrained by the need to commute or being stuck 16 floors up in a city office block. This gives me the freedom to adjust my schedule to take advantage of what daylight and fresh air is available. Even if this means working at opposite ends of the day to gain daylight in the middle.

At weekends if it is sunny make the most of it. Manchester is not short of rainy days on which to do chores. Note that even on a cloudy day the light outside is brighter than any light you have in your house even though it may not seem that way.

I bought a SAD light which I use every morning. I found it works best when used early. Once morning has broken it becomes less effective.

### Alcohol, caffeine and sugar

Alcohol is a depressant and metabolic poison. The temptation is to drink more when it is better to cut back as much as possible. I cannot think of a solution to any of life’s problems that has revealed itself through the bottom of a glass.

As anxiety is a factor for me so I cut back on coffee. As an IT person this was quite a difficult adjustment to make.

The main problem with sugary or refined carbohydrate food is that it creates highs and low, surges and slumps. With the lows and slumps comes the craving for more sugary or refined carbohydrate food. This has predictable consequences.

### Exercise

It takes surprisingly little exercise to gain a noticeable benefit. A simple walk in the fresh air is better than nothing. Around 15 minutes at an intensity that leaves you breathless is all it takes to have a real impact. Much as I detest running all I have to do is put on my trainers and run 1½ miles around the village first thing in the morning.

I noticed three benefits

* Mood lift
* Fitness improvement
* Bringing body tiredness in line with mental tiredness aids sleep

I find that when my physical and mental tiredness are out of sync then my sleep suffers and I’m depleted before the day has even begun.

### Milestones to half-milestones

The same challenges that are easily met in Summer become daunting in Winter. When you are not in the frame of mind to rise to a daunting task then you will find yourself prevaricating or finding reasons to work on alternative tasks. The danger is that you lose so much momentum that you grind to a halt.

To reduce inertial drag I do the following

1. Break a task down into smaller less daunting chunks
2. Book time for certain activities into your diary. Make these sacrosanct; a promise to yourself
3. Write down what I have achieved and read it back at the end of the week. You may be surprised by how much you really accomplish.
4. When you reach the halfway point to your goal start counting down the remaining tasks not up towards the total. I find having only 3 tasks left is a more comforting thought than feeling I'm about to embark on task 47!
5. Pair with a colleague/friend. A commitment to another is easier to maintain.

On point #2 try not to break promises, even though you have made to yourself.

A diary of achievements is a good practise to maintain regardless of whether you are a SAD sufferer or not. It will be useful in 1:2:1s, half and end-of-year reviews.

### Keep a mood diary

I gained a lot of benefit from Talking Therapies. One of the tasks I had to do was to keep a mood diary recording the following.

* What I did
* When I did it
* Where I did it
* With whom
* How I’d rate my mood before
* How I’d rate my mood after

Reviewing the diary revealed some surprising and actionable insights.

* Just how draining I found some activities
* Some activities I hadn’t given much thought to were actually giving me a sense of well being
* How few activities I was doing for my own pleasure. All work and no play etc.

I mentioned earlier about the sense of borrowing from my future self. If you are feeling drained, then you won’t feel much like doing anything. Even those things you would find pleasurable and energising. Without the pleasurable and energising activities, you will be borrowing off a dwindling resource. Somewhat like driving a car with a malfunctioning alternator. The car will run but once the battery is flat it stops.

### Exercise again!

I mentioned that I hate running. I love cycling, swimming and hiking. So why have I mentioned going for a run? Why not cycling, swimming and hiking?

It boils down to that feeling of being daunted. Depression is a motivation sponge. The latter three require more preparation whereas running simply requires me to put on trainers.

As I began to feel better I was able to reintroduce the other activities and gain the benefit from them.

In the May to October season I found open water swimming to be particularly beneficial. You have quiet, open air, smooth continuous activity where your stroke and your breathing synchronise and your mind slowly becomes calm.

### Talk about it

If I could go back in time and give my past self one piece of advice it would be to talk to someone about it.

Much is made of toxic masculinity preventing men talking about it but I think it is more complicated than that.

* Can't talk to strangers because they are strangers
* Can't talk to friends because you don't want to lay your troubles at their door
* Can't talk to family because there are few secrets in a family
* Can't reconcile it with yourself because part of you quantifies your situation against the situation of others and trivialises your situation.

2019 was the year I was “drowning”. Family tragedy, near loss of a child, a series of unpleasant life altering events all came to a head. Instead of feeling better in the Spring I started to sink, and it soon became a whole lot worse.

There were two vital points that set me on the road to recovery.

* Admitting to my sister that I didn’t feel able to carry on
* Chance conversation with a colleague and friend who I knew had been on anti-depressants and they were able to allay my fears on that subject.

Simply voicing how I was feeling lifted a huge weight off my shoulders. The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. The journey back to mental health is a thousand mile journey but that first step feels HUGE!

I was also extremely fortunate that my employer, Moneysupermarket, had set up an internal programme called [Thrive](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDyESGjBuYA) to promote mental health. The programme team won an award for best new workplace approach to mental health. Having benefited from the programme I feel that the award was richly deserved.

## Closing thoughts

When I realised that I wasn't well I did a lot of Googling and other reading. Here are some of the resources that helped.

1. <https://web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>
2. [Zero suicide alliance](https://www.relias.co.uk/hubfs/ZSA-FullTraining-10012020/story_html5.html)
3. [Reasons to stay alive](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/25733573-reasons-to-stay-alive#:~:text=Matt%20Haig's%20accessible%20and%20life,Matt%20Haig%20suffers%20from%20depression.) - Matt Haig
4. [Talking Therapies](https://www.mytalkingtherapies.com/) - Your GP will have the telephone number for your local area.

I stress again, the most important step for me was to be able to talk about it. I was too close to my problem to be able to see the way through it or to solve it myself.

Remember, you are not defined by a mental illness or a lesser person for having suffered.