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A change in the weather

The change in the weather over the past week has certainly been dramatic. The heat that had been with us for so many weeks has suddenly come to an end. Across Hong Kong, air-conditioners have been turned off and heaters turned on at night; warmer winter clothing has taken out of cupboards and drawers; and warm drinks have replaced cold beverages. The change in the weather came quickly although the Bureau of Meteorology did get their forecasting correct.

The weather is our daily contact with nature and it affects the way that we feel and act. Consciously or not, we know that every time we step outside the weather is going to affect the way we feel. So what is the influence of the weather on our well-being and how we act? What is the connection between temperature and temperament?

The behaviour of animals is often closely linked to the approaching weather. It is suggested that bees stay close to their hives when a summer rainstorm is on the way; while birds fly close to the ground and increase the amount of food that they eat before the bad weather sets in. So how does the weather affect our behaviour? We perform at our best when our bodies are not under stress from our surroundings, and that includes the weather. But different aspects of weather can have very specific effects on us.

Air pressure is continually fluctuating, and researchers have found that slight changes in pressure can influence human brain activity, causing significant changes in attention and short term memory functions. So next time you find it hard to concentrate, blame it on a change in air pressure!

The body finds it hard to cope with extremes in temperature, either producing enough heat to keep us warm in very low temperatures or getting rid of our own internally produced heat when temperatures are high. Mortality rates tend to rise when temperatures soar, particularly for the elderly whose bodies find it harder to cope. During a heat wave, when the temperature is significantly higher than expected for the time of year, people tend to behave more irrationally. New York City, for example, sees regular summer crime waves which are believed to be due to the hot weather.

Heat and humidity are possibly the worst combination, by affecting our behaviour, decreasing our general activity, lowering our overall level of performance, making us irritable and lethargic. Cooler days with lower humidity, however, tend to increase alertness and general activity, and improve our mood. Basically, we become nicer people.

What type of weather do you like? The really hot and humid summer weather, when it feels like you are walking into an oven when you go outside and you immediately start to sweat. Or do you like it more in winter when the wind chill takes the temperature down to single digits and you can't put on enough clothes to stay warm?

But what is it like in a really cold climate? The following passage was written by a teenager in Finland.

“We are so used to cold temperatures. In our town the annual mean temperature is only 2.1 degrees Celsius! Winter lasts here about five months. When the temperature is near -40C it's not so nice. Every morning we plug our cars into the electricity supply to warm the engines. How many layers of clothes do we need to wear? Well, when it's near -30C we have about 4 layers. We go to school in spite of the cold; however, we are allowed to stay home when it's lower than -20C. There is a real danger of frostbite.”

What about us here in Hong Kong? What do we think of our winter? December and January are clearly the winter months because compared to the other times of the year the weather is cold. While the temperature never goes down to freezing it still feels cold to us, particularly when a northerly wind is blowing. It might be said that we have the best of both worlds; warm summers and cool winters, without the extremes experienced in many parts of the world.

This should be positive news for us. The cooler weather provides the perfect conditions to study for the upcoming Mid-Year Examinations. There can be no better way of spending a cold winter's day over the Christmas and New Year holiday period than to stay at home preparing for the examinations in early January.

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