"To every thing there is season," "The Book of Ecclesiastes" reminds us. There's a "time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance." And "a time to every purpose under heaven."

The ancient Greeks observed that those times often coincided with the changing of the seasons. "Melancholy occurs in autumn," the philosopher Posidonious wrote two thousand years ago, "whereas mania in summer." And Greco-Roman physicians prescribed an application of sunlight toward the eyes for depressed patients. In 1984, Norman Rosenthal and Thomas Wehr gave the malady a name: Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

In "The Emotional Calendar," John Sharp, a psychiatrist who is on the faculty of Harvard Medical School and the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, examines the impact of the four seasons on our moods and behavior. And he broadens the discussion to "man-made seasons," including back to school, income tax days, the Super Bowl, birthdays, holidays, personal memories and milestones. Rich in emotion and meaning, he suggests, our emotional calendars "are harder to manage and can cause us trouble." To ameliorate their effects -- and break disruptive patterns -- we must take "adaptive control."

In a sense, "The Emotional Calendar" builds a monument to the obvious. Most of us know how stressful Thanksgiving can be, as children and in-laws take over the kitchen, Uncle Phil makes political pronouncements, and someone has to remember that Victor is a vegetarian and Wendy is on the wagon. YouTube, Sharp indicates, lists almost 5,000 videos on birthdays gone wrong, and a Google search reveals more than 65 million hits on the subject.
Researchers, Sharp acknowledges, are not all that certain about the physiological causes of behaviors associated with a change of seasons. We have evidence, for example, that in northern Europe a disproportionate number of babies are conceived in June. But while some studies show that levels of testosterone in men and luteinizing hormones (which trigger ovulation) peak at 20 percent above average in that month, others find that men produce the greatest number -- and the heartiest -- sperm a few months earlier. And some surveys have found that people actually have less sexual intercourse in spring.

Suicides also peak in spring. Is it because deeply depressed people feel the gap between the seasonal expectations of fresh starts and the realities of their own lives? Or, as psychologist Norman Dinges believes, because the increase in energy they feel in the spring gives them the wherewithal to kill themselves? Sharp doesn't really know.

These uncertainties, and the difficulty of assessing the power of calendar-based disorders as "independent variables," make it difficult to know how an individual can take "adaptive control." Mindful of wide disparities among patients, perhaps, Sharp does little more than round up the usual suspects. To help manage seasonal "hotspots," and adjust levels of energy, he suggests over-the-counter medications, "natural" supplements and traditional herbs. When anxiety is excessive, he prescribes tranquilizers (in the benzodiazepine class, including Valium, Klonopin, Ativan, Serax and Xanax), but only after a thorough review of the patient's well being and current medications. For major depressions, he ups the ante to Zoloft, Lexapro, Wellbutrin and Cymbalta.

On their own or with a little help, most folks, Sharp implies, can "bend flexibly with the winds of change," without recourse to medication. The first step is to "turn off the autopilot and recognize the positive and negative patterns" associated with our emotional calendars. Three strategies can then be deployed: cultivating emotional distance; changing external circumstances; and changing attitudes. "Mindfulness therapy," including meditation, can help. So can a closer connection to nature, through gardening, embrace of the slow food movement, and the construction of a sun room.

If these recommendations seem to be a bit "new agey," they are. But it's helpful to be reminded of the simple advice that animates "The Emotional Calendar." It's better to remember than repress, to confront and not avoid, to seek support (from the right people) and not remain isolated. To maintain physical and emotional balance, it pays to keep a consistent schedule, plan ahead, get plenty of sleep, eat well, exercise, stretch the mind, relax, and take medications, when appropriate, and in the doses prescribed by the physician.

Although the emotional calendar will always shift and evolve, most of us, Sharp concludes, can, through greater awareness of nature and our own history, take greater control of -- and maybe even extract some joy from -- the seasons that structure our lives.