

TIPS FOR BEATING THE WINTER BLUES

As the days grow shorter and the temperature outside begins to drop, some people may begin to experience feeling more tired than usual, less motivated, and sometimes feeling a little “down in the dumps.” The Mayo Clinic estimates that approximately 20 % of the population suffers from some sort of seasonal depression brought on by shorter days.

The more extreme version of the “winter blues” is called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), which affects approximately 5% of the American population. The symptoms of this disorder include feelings of dread, anxiety and depression, which often appear toward late October or early November, and remain until late spring when there is a significant increase in daylight hours.

SAD appears to be related to an increased production of a chemical known as melatonin, which is a hormone secreted by the pineal gland located in the brain. Melatonin production peaks in darkness and is suppressed in sunlight.

For individuals with SAD, the increased hours of darkness in the winter months results in a triggering of an increased production of melatonin. The more melatonin that is produced, the more likely an individual is to feel depressed and drowsy.

As the melatonin production increases, the chemical serotonin – also produced by the brain, decreases. The body begins to crave carbohydrates in an effort to restore the function of the chemical serotonin. Eating carbohydrates causes a stimulation in the production of serotonin in the brain.

The result of this cycle of biological imbalance is often a winter filled with impaired functioning, isolation, and an overall feeling of despair. With professional treatment, however, individuals have an opportunity to improve their functioning and their outlook.

There are numerous symptoms of the “winter blues,” but the main ones usually appear in the colder season and include:

- Change in appetite, particularly for sweet or starchy foods
- Weight gain
- Change in sleep patterns
- Tendency to oversleep
- Avoidance of social situations
- Decreased ability to concentrate
- Irritability
- Decreased energy



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The following are some tips to help prevent the blues from coming on, as well as to get yourself back on track if they have already settled in and taken up residence:

- 1. Slow down and relax.** Relaxation can ease tension and leave you with soothing, calmer energy. Activities such as meditation, calming breathing techniques or yoga are often helpful to accomplish this goal.
- 2. Start a gratitude list.** Sometimes it is helpful to be reminded of all the good things you have in life. Try to think of five things you are grateful for each day and record them in a journal, on your computer, or in a day planner. This often helps to feel motivated and more energized to deal with each day.
- 3. Reward yourself.** Whether it is sitting down with a good book or planning a vacation, rewarding yourself with self-care often helps to get your mind and body relaxed, resulting in feelings of reduced tension and a sense of overall wellness.
- 4. Get physical.** The effects of a good quality workout can last several hours after you are finished, often resulting in extra energy throughout the day. Additionally, your metabolism will stay elevated too. Another benefit of exercise is the release of endorphins that help to pick up your mood.
- 3. Consume a healthy diet.** Deficiency in any nutrient can cause an imbalance to the body, which may result in a worsening of the winter blues or seasonal affective disorder. Healthy foods supply your body with nutrients and help even out your blood sugar and energy levels.
- 6. “Lighten up.”** The cold weather can cause you to spend less time outdoors, and a lack of sunlight can result in feeling “down.” Aim to get a little sun on your face each day, especially in the morning hours. Sunlight provides us with Vitamin D and helps improve our mood. You can also increase exposure to light indoors by replacing light bulbs with full-spectrum light bulbs, or investing in a light box.
- 7. Do a good deed.** Doing something good for someone else can often be an energy booster, while at the same time helping you to feel the positive benefits of making a difference in someone’s life. Giving the gift of ourselves helps to enhance the lives of others and to leave us feeling replenished.
- 8. Harness the power of support.** Reaching out to a co-worker, a mentor, a family member or a friend, can brighten your mood and remind you that you do have people that care for you and who provide encouragement when you need it. In addition to people, sometimes pets can play an important role as well.
- 9. Embrace the season.** Find ways to enjoy the winter season. Bundle up and take a brisk walk outdoors during your lunch or after work to get some sunlight. Explore new activities such as participating in and/or watching winter sporting events. Whenever you sense your mood declining, do your best to enjoy the season.

**If you or a family member experience discomfort
with the change of the seasons, give the EAP a call.**

WE CAN HELP!



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