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Learn to Beat the “Winter Blues”

As days get shorter and darkness longer, do you feel slowed down or unmotivated to wake up? Do you feel “down in the dumps?” You may be experiencing changes in mood and behaviour that are affected by the changes in the seasons.

There is a formal condition called *Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)* that is now widely accepted by the medical community and public at large. It is a mood disorder linked with bouts of depression that are related to seasonal changes in length of daylight. But the condition is NOT to be confused with full depression. For a formal diagnosis to be made, SAD symptoms (such as depression, fatigue, anxiety/irritability, difficulty concentrating, craving sugary/starchy foods, lack of sex drive, overeating) must occur regularly during the fall and winter months and also for a full two years before diagnosis.

However, you may notice much smaller changes in your mood than the above symptoms - probably not drastic enough to seek professional help. Instead, you may be experiencing a lesser form of SAD, known as the “**winter blues.**” This condition can make you feel less cheerful, energetic, creative, and productive during the dark winter days than at other times of the year.

Why might you get either the Winter Blues or Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)?

Individuals experiencing Winter Blues or Seasonal Affective Disorder have a difficult time adjusting to the shortage of sunlight in the winter months. Symptoms are at their worst in January and February when days are shortest.

Melatonin (a sleep-related hormone), believed to be a cause of symptoms of depression, increases in production in darkness. So, when the days are shorter and darker, more of this hormone is produced, making you less energetic.

Those at risk:

Young people (particularly those in first year college or university) and women are at the highest risk for the disorder, but it can affect anyone. Often, they do not feel bad enough to seek medical attention, but they definitely feel less cheerful in the fall and winter. The condition typically begins around the age of 20 and decreases around the age of 50.

Top ten ways to avoid the winter blues:

1. Pay attention to your moods and energy levels. If you realize that your spirits begin to sink towards the end of summer, take preventive action as suggested below.
2. Try to establish a mind set that will help you to enjoy the wintertime. Winter IS going to happen, so focus on enjoying it.
3. Plan active events for yourself before fall actually sets in.
4. Get out in the bright daylight as much as you can. Walk outdoors on sunny days, even during the winter months. If it is grey and overcast, use as much indoor lighting as you can.
5. Increase the amount of outdoor light coming into your home, apartment, or room. Position furniture so the windows are not blocked. Open blinds and/or curtains.
6. Stay physically active and begin your physical activity before the winter blues begin to get hold of you. Physical exercise helps relieve stress and anxiety, both of which can make the symptoms WORSE. Being more fit can make you feel better about yourself.
7. If possible, take a winter vacation or spring break in a sunny, warm location.
8. Learn more effective ways to manage stress. Increased levels of stress are linked with the beginning of symptoms.
9. Do something nice for yourself every day.
10. If you feel yourself “sinking” and realize you are losing control, don't feel ashamed or try to hide it. Remember that many other people also feel this way. Learn what you can from this season, so that you can apply your strategies to future fall and winter seasons. However, If you think you may be suffering from the formal condition of SAD, discuss your symptoms with a healthcare or mental health professional.