WL 246

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EXTENSION SERVICE

Why Be Sad? How to Beat the Winter Blues

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"If you are depressed, you are living in the past. If you are anxious, you are living in the future. If you are at peace, you are living in the present."

If the short, gray winter days set the stage for you or loved ones to feel down, drained of energy, or extra grouchy, you may suffer from depression known appropriately as SAD, or Seasonal Affective Disorder. SAD usually starts as days shorten in the fall and ends in late spring when the days become brighter and longer.

It's SAD when

- You feel better when spring arrives (in contrast to regular depression that stays all year.)
- The pattern repeats at least two years in a row.
- There is no other obvious cause for low mood, such as being out of work in the winter.

How can I recognize my SAD or that of a family member?
Please place an X in front of each statement that is true for you or a loved one.

In the darker months, do you/they:

__ Feel more tired or have lower energy?
__ Require more sleep?
__ Typically gain weight?
__ Visit your physician more often?
__ Have trouble waking in the morning?
__ Become irritable?
__ Crave more sweets and carbohydrates?
__ Withdraw socially?

SAD can be quite serious. Talk to your doctor or a mental health professional if you have two or more of these symptoms. Keep in mind, if needed, most medical plans cover counseling (psychotherapy) as a medical expense.

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What causes SAD?

SADness happens when winter's late dawn and early dusk cause changes in the body's internal biological clock, or circadian rhythm. This affects levels of mood-altering brain chemicals, including the feel-good chemical serotonin, as well as the hormone melatonin.

When you are "a quart low in serotonin," you can feel tired, depressed, and crave carbohydrates. Weight gain in winter can be a result of eating more as you self-medicate to raise your serotonin and feel better. Serotonin levels are lowest in February and highest in August.

What lifts SADness?

Light therapy, exercise, stress management, counseling, and medication (or a combination) have proven helpful in resetting the brain's clock.

Light therapy

Sitting in front of a light box is the most studied treatment, bringing relief to 75 percent of those with SAD. It has repeatedly been found to be as effective as antidepressant medication but works faster and causes fewer side effects. Symptoms of depression improve within three to four weeks if light therapy is going to help.

When and how much?

- The best time is early morning, to mimic sunrise. The Morningness – Eveningness Questionnaire *(www.cet.org/eng/Tools_ENG.html)* gives specific guidelines about your optimal times to go to bed, get up, and use a light box.
- Mayo Clinic recommends sitting 12 to 14 inches from a 10,000-lux light box for 30 minutes daily, with adjustments based on response.

Talk to your doctor before using light therapy. Start slowly. Track your depression to see what changes. Don't use light therapy if you have diabetes with eye problems, macular degeneration, or bipolar disorder.

Exercise and stress management tips for lifting mood

- **Green exercise.** Bundle up and go for a walk in the sun. Even 10 minutes will raise your mood and self-esteem as you soak up that vitamin D.
- **Nurture yourself.** When you awaken, give yourself 30 seconds to answer this question, "What is one nice thing I can do for myself today?" Then do it! This quick decision will set the stage for the rest of your day.
- **Find water.** Swimming, walking, or sitting beside a lake or stream raises the brain's serotonin level.
- **Invite a friend to exercise.** Companionship and exercise double the benefits.
- **Breathe out that stress!** Practice mindful slow deep breathing, yoga, or meditation. Breathe out through a straw to slow your breathing to six breaths per minute.
- **Take five minutes.** Before you get out of bed, tune into your breath and body. Notice any stiffness, then stretch gently as you breathe deeply while lying in your bed.
- **Mood music.** Discover soothing music and play it as you do daily activities.

What about medication?

Taking antidepressants from autumn through March can help. Medicine is more effective when combined with counseling or light therapy. If you are sad with SAD symptoms, please seek help! No one should suffer with untreated depression when options are available to feel better.

References

Mayo Clinic. "Choosing a Light Therapy Box." *www.mayoclinic.com/health/seasonal-affective-disorder-treatment/DN00013/NSECTIONGROUP=2*

10 Things You Didn't Know About Seasonal Affective Disorder. Psych Central. *http://psychcentral.com/lib/10-things-you-dont-know-about-seasonal-affective-disorder/0002*

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