

Winter Blues

By Dr. Rosemarie Scolaro Moser



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For many of us, this is the time of year when the highs of the holidays are memories and we sink into the doldrums of long, gloomy, dark nights. We may feel sluggish, down, and moody. We may struggle with weight gain and fatigue. We may feel less motivated. Some call this the Winter Blues.

The Winter Blues is actually not a medical term, but a mild sub-type or “sub-syndrome” of Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD. SAD is an “atypical” major depression that usually occurs in the winter months, recurring yearly.

The Winter Blues and SAD are considered chronobiological disorders, meaning that our physical internal clocks are off due to the change in daylight exposure as we enter a new season. Moving into the winter months results in fewer hours of daylight affecting our hormones, such as serotonin, which modulates happiness, and melatonin, which regulates sleep.

Due to the change in our daily rhythm and in these hormones, we may find ourselves sleeping more, feeling less mentally sharp, isolating ourselves, and craving carbs. Sounds like animal hibernation.

SAD is thought to be four times more frequent in women and more frequent the farther north from the equator you go due to a reduction in daylight. It seems more likely to surface in adulthood, although adolescents can also suffer from it. According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, up to 20 percent of the population suffers from the mild form of Winter Blues, whereas 4 to 6 percent suffer from SAD.

What can be done to relieve the symptoms of Winter Blues?

- **Light therapy:** Specifically, exposure to 10,000 lux of light for 30 minutes per day may be effective. Research has shown that use of a light box providing fluorescent light without UV wavelength may be essential in coping with SAD. Before purchasing or using a light box, talk to your physician. Side effects can include headache, eyestrain, retinal damage, and nausea, and some people don’t tolerate light exposure well. Do not look directly into the light, and avoid using it late in the day as the brightness may signal your body to stay wired rather than fall asleep at bedtime.
- **Pharmacotherapy:** For some who experience an underlying depression to begin with, medications to address the symptoms of depression may reduce the symptoms of SAD as well as treat the year-round depression. Consult a primary care physician or psychiatrist to determine whether this is a reasonable treatment alternative.

- **Exercise:** We know that physical exercise increases endorphin levels. Endorphins are neurotransmitters or hormones that improve mood and the feeling of well-being. In addition, exercise provides greater strength and energy as well as burns off the extra calories related to carb consumption. If exercise is performed outside, then there is also a benefit of natural light exposure!

- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy:** A landmark research study headed by Dr. Kelly Rohan at the University of Vermont published in 2015 in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* compared the use of six weeks of light therapy versus Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in 177 individuals. CBT is a psychotherapy approach which is used to promote positive change by identifying and treating difficulties arising from irrational thinking, misperceptions, dysfunctional thoughts, and faulty learning. After two winters, follow up results from these individuals showed that 50 percent of those who were treated with light therapy had a recurrence of symptoms, compared to only 27 percent of those who were treated with CBT.

It’s important to keep busy by scheduling pleasurable activities that YOU enjoy, and try something new. Reduce the chores and obligations if possible. Meet friends for lunch at a new restaurant, try a body massage, enroll in an adult education class, learn a new hobby, regularly schedule movie or theater or concert activities on the weekends, attend a local lecture, volunteer at a food pantry or soup kitchen, try yoga, or contact a relative with whom you haven’t been in touch. Plan your life with events to which you look forward, to help bridge you through the winter months and into spring.

Rachel Carson’s words offer hope: “There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature — the assurance that dawn comes after night and spring after winter.” The winter solstice, or shortest day of the year, has passed and by February we gain about two and a half minutes each day. The Winter Blues are temporary. Know that while they’re here, you don’t have to suffer with them. ■



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