

Weathering the Winter Blues

Many people would say they are not as happy, and they feel more sluggish, during the winter. People are impacted by the changing seasons and don't realize that a case of the "winter blues" may be a condition known as **Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)**. SAD is a mood disorder where people suffer from symptoms of depression during the winter months, **due to the cold temperatures and shortened days**. The seasonal variations of light affect "biological internal clocks" or "circadian rhythms". When days are shorter and darker, a person produces more melatonin, a sleep-related hormone that causes symptoms of depression. SAD affects half a million people every winter between the months of September and April, peaking in December, January, and February. This condition occurs twice more frequently in women than in men.

A person with Seasonal Affective Disorder may experience symptoms such as:

- *Depression*
- *Anxiety*
- *Mood changes*
- *Sleep problems*
- *Lethargy*
- *Overeating*
- *Social Problems*
- *Sexual Problems*



A diagnosis of SAD can be made after three consecutive winters of these symptoms followed by non-depressed periods in the spring or summer. A qualified health professional can provide effective treatment of SAD. Antidepressant medications can be combined successfully with light therapy, but people who are proactive in managing their own health with lifestyle choices they make are the most successful in overcoming SAD.

Provided by Community of Christ Health Ministries Association
in cooperation with Mental Health America of the Heartland
www.HMAcofchrist.org and www.MHAH.org

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Effective Treatments for the Winter Blues

Light Exposure

In general 30 minutes of light exposure daily is enough to improve your mood. Many experiencing the winter blues find relief from the regular use of light boxes. Similar effects to the sun's natural rays can be obtained with light box intensities of 2,500 to 10,000 lux (as compared to a normal light fixture that emits 250 to 500 lux). The bright light restricts production of melatonin in the brain and improves the mood for those suffering from the winter blues.

For those who have difficulty falling asleep, who sleep too much and still feel tired, or who wake up throughout the night, bright light exposure in the morning is best. For those who fall asleep easily or wake up too early, the best time for light exposure is evening. This could include going on a walk outside or opening the curtains in your room as soon as you get out of bed.

Sleep Habits

Ideally, sleep should be limited to 8 hours and maintained on a regular schedule. This means going to bed and waking up at the same time everyday. Irregular sleeping—too much or at various times—can increase levels of melatonin which can contribute to feelings of depression.

Exercise Routine

Exercise is a way to help people combat feeling the blues in the winter. Studies have shown that one hour of aerobic exercise outside is as beneficial as 2.5 hours of light treatment indoors. Exercise can reduce stress and help with depression. Outdoor activities like walking, skiing, sledding and having a snowball fight can help sufferers of the blues feel better.

Eating Right

People crave junk food and soft drinks during the winter months. These high-sugar foods or carbohydrates can make you feel great initially but the sugar high can turn into the sugar low. It would be better to eat complex carbohydrates like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

These are few simple suggestions on how to avoid or overcome the winter blues. Keep in mind that these lifestyle choices make a difference in mental and physical health and wellness of everyone.

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