

Psychological News You Can Use

Pennsylvania Psychological Association

Winter Blues: More Than Just the Blahs

by
Pauline Wallin, Ph.D.

Feeling kind of blah during the winter? Or do you suffer from the more serious winter blues? Not sure which is which? Here are some general guidelines:

Blahs: You feel bored or lazy. You become a couch potato, slacking off exercise and gaining a few pounds. But overall you still enjoy life and get your work done without much extra effort. When you have bad moods, they don't last long.

Blues: You're chronically tired and lethargic, no matter how much sleep you get (and it seems that all you want to do is sleep). You crave sugary or starchy foods more than normal. You may have mood swings, trouble concentrating, low tolerance for stress, and a generally sad or hopeless mood, which persists for weeks or months. Just getting through the day takes great effort. Come spring, you start to feel like your old self again.

If this describes you, you may be one of more than 10 million Americans who suffer from seasonal affective disorder (acronym: SAD), a form of clinical depression. This depression can be quite severe, in some cases requiring hospitalization.

What causes SAD?

Some people are more vulnerable to becoming depressed during the dark winter months. SAD tends to run in families, although the exact genetic mechanism is unknown. Women aged 20 to 50 are more likely to suffer than men.

Sunlight deprivation plays a major role. The rate of SAD in New Hampshire, where winter daylight hours are very short, is twice that of Florida. With few exceptions communities closer to the equator have less incidence of SAD than those farther from the equator.

No one knows for sure how daylight interacts with body processes to trigger SAD, but some research suggests that the pineal gland, a small structure in the brain, may be involved. This gland produces the hormone melatonin, which helps regulate daily body rhythms in response to light transmitted through the eyes. Other research suggests that the brain chemical serotonin may also be implicated in SAD.

What can you do about it?

Increase your exposure to as much natural light as possible:

- Spend time outdoors in daylight every day, especially if you work in a windowless en-



Pauline Wallin, Ph.D.
is a licensed psychologist and
business consultant in Camp Hill,
PA, and author of "Taming Your
Inner Brat: A Guide for Transform-
ing Self-defeating Behavior."
www.drwallin.com

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vironment. Take a brisk walk outside during your break or lunch hour. If you dress for it, you won't feel cold after the first minute or two.

- At home, take a walk or do a little yard work. Keep blinds open during the day and sit near a window whenever possible.

Maintain a regular schedule:

- Go to sleep and wake up at the same time each day
- If you have trouble getting up in the morning, set your bedroom light on a timer to turn on lights 15-20 minutes before your alarm goes off.
- Eat meals at the same time every day.
- Eat nutritious food - You'll crave less junk.
- Make exercise a part of your daily routine.

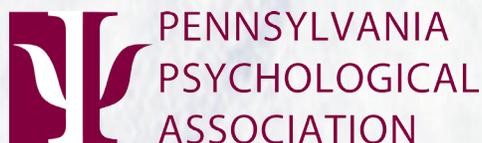
Avoid hiding from the world:

- Schedule time with friends.
- Play with your kids (or your neighbor's kids).
- Get season tickets to concerts, theater performances or sports events.
- Make a phone call to someone you haven't talked to in a while.
- Help someone who is worse off than you.

Tried the above and still depressed?

- Consult a health professional to make sure that your symptoms are not the result of other problems. Fatigue, depression and trouble concentrating can signal an underlying medical condition.
- If you need professional treatment, consider one or more of these options. You may need to experiment to see which work best for you:
 1. *Light therapy:* 20-30 minutes of exposure to very bright light (10,000 lumens) early in the morning has been shown to alleviate depression in some people diagnosed with SAD. Specially designed light boxes, available without a prescription, cost about \$150 to \$300.
 2. *Psychotherapy:* Cognitive behavioral therapy with a psychologist can teach you how to think more positively, and to change self-defeating behaviors. Recent research suggests that psychotherapy has long-term effects, which can minimize SAD symptoms in subsequent years.
 3. *Medication:* Certain antidepressants have been approved for the treatment of SAD. They are most effective when combined with light therapy and/or psychotherapy.
- In extreme cases, none of the above interventions will help. That's when it's time to consider moving south.

This article is for informational purposes only, and is not intended to offer diagnosis or treatment of any medical or psychological condition. All treatment decisions should be made in partnership with your health professional.



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