

Surviving The Winter Blues

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We are used to tough winters here in Chautauqua County – the wind, the snow, the freezing temperatures – and we're proud of it. But sometimes it feels like winter will never stop, and that is when we start wondering if we have the "winter blues."

Winter blues or seasonal affective disorder, affects about 5 percent of the population, especially those in the northern United States. Feelings of sadness or depression and increased appetite and over sleeping are common. Irritability and poor concentration are often noted. The exact cause of seasonal affective disorder is not known at this time, but it is believed to be related to wintertime lack of sunlight. The number of hours of daylight shrinks each year until Dec. 21, and a lack of sunlight means our brains produce less serotonin, a brain chemical that affects our moods.

There are some things you can do to help yourself if you are feeling the winter blues. Getting more sunlight is often recommended. Opening the curtains and shades first thing in the morning and sitting near a window is an easy way to get some sun.

Walking outside for at least 30 minutes each day, weather-permitting, is often suggested because it combines sunlight with exercise, which also helps fight depression. Outdoor exercise is thought to be the most effective. Sometimes it just is not possible to exercise outside. But exercise is beneficial in fighting depression – whether it takes place at the gym or at home doing housework. Moving muscles, however



you do it, is helpful. Pop in an exercise DVD or work out with a fitness show. If you are huddled on the couch watching the soaps, get up during the commercials and march in place. Every little bit helps.

Good self-care is important when coping with any kind of depression. A healthy diet is an important step to take. Sometimes in wintertime, we have to make a real effort to get five servings of fruits and vegetables. We can add extra veggies to soups and chili to make those nice, hot comfort foods we crave more nutritious. Check out recipes online or at the library for new ideas for healthy foods. Some studies have linked eating a lot of processed, fatty foods with sad moods, so it might be best to try to limit those.

Sleep is also important. Setting a regular bedtime is helpful. Limit caffeine after lunchtime. Keeping your bedroom cool at night is good, but staying warm is important, too. Some people find that wearing socks to bed in winter helps them sleep better.

You can't change the weather, but you can try to change your attitude toward it.

You may never love the winter months, but identifying some enjoyable aspects of them could be helpful.

Building a snowman, watching hock-

ey or baking bread are some February activities. Make a list of stuff you can only do in winter. Some folks get busy checking out seed catalogs for next summer's garden. Sometimes loneliness and isolation – sometimes called "cabin fever" – are triggers for depression. Pick up the phone and call a friend or relative. They may share your feelings and be glad you called. Use the social media, email or Facebook, to reach out to old friends. Get yourself out of the house. Go to a religious service or the grocery store. Meet a friend for coffee. Consider doing volunteer work if your schedule allows.

If winter blues persist or worsen, talk to your health care provider. He or she can make sure there is no medical cause for your depression. There is no test for seasonal affective disorder and diagnosis is made from your description of your symptoms. Feelings of helplessness and hopeless or any thoughts of suicide or self-harm are indications that you should contact your healthcare provider immediately or go to the emergency room. Crisis Services (834-3131) is available by phone around the clock if you are not sure how to cope with getting help. Counseling and/or medication are often recommended. Some doctors recommend light therapy. Use of broad spectrum light bulbs in household fixtures have been reported helpful by some individuals.

Seasonal affective disorder is a form of depression that can be readily treated by counseling and medication, along with making some healthy changes in lifestyle. Don't be afraid to talk to a doctor or mental health professional. With a little effort, you can beat those winter blues.