

Think Well, Be Well

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Coping With the Winter Blues

As winter settles in, bringing colder temperatures and shorter days, many individuals grapple with a common phenomenon known as the winter blues, which are symptoms of low-level sadness lasting through the winter months. Going beyond winter blues, some people may have a complex type of depression called seasonal affective disorder (SAD). People experiencing SAD show signs of a major depressive disorder, including difficulty with sleeping and eating and noticeable fluctuations in energy levels and weight.

According to an American Psychiatric Association (APA) survey, 2 in 5 adults say their overall mood declines in the winter.

This article explores the difference between the winter blues and SAD and provides tips for coping with seasonal behavioral changes.

Is It Winter Blues or SAD?

The winter blues and SAD are two different conditions. "Winter blues" is a general term, not a medical diagnosis. It's fairly common and usually clears up on its own, making it less serious than SAD. The National Institutes of Health defines the winter blues as usually tied to something specific, such as stressful holidays or reminders of absent loved ones. The winter blues are common and usually alleviate in a short amount of time. According to an APA poll, 67% of adults say they notice at least one behavioral change when the season changes to winter, such as sleeping more (31%) or feeling fatigued (25%) or depressed (23%).

Conversely, SAD is a type of depression that occurs at specific times of the year, commonly during the fall and winter months. The APA estimates that about 5% of U.S. adults experience SAD, lasting about 40% of the year. The condition is more common among women than men.

The lack of sunlight during this period can disrupt the body's circadian rhythm and change serotonin and melatonin levels. These hormones are critical for managing mood and sleep patterns. According to the APA, people with SAD experience a cluster of symptoms that may include the following:

- Feeling sad
- Experiencing a loss of interest or pleasure in activities that are typically enjoyed
- Changing appetite patterns (e.g., eating more and craving carbohydrates and sugars)
- Changing sleep patterns (e.g., sleeping too much)
- Experiencing a loss of energy or feeling more tired despite a good amount of sleep
- Slowing down in thinking, concentration or decision-making
- Feeling hopeless, worthless or guilty
- Experiencing thoughts of death or suicide

These symptoms can be distressing and overwhelming and can interfere with daily functioning. A key feature of SAD is that it follows a regular pattern, appearing each year as the seasons change and going away several months later.

Coping Tips for Seasonal Behavioral Changes

While you may not be able to change the weather or amount of daylight during the winter months, you can practice good self-care to combat behavioral changes. Try the following tips for coping with the winter blues:

- **Change your mindset.** Refocus your thoughts on wintertime pleasures by making a list of things that you enjoy about winter. Some ideas include getting cozy with a book, making traditional recipes, enjoying the smell of fresh snow and listening to wood crackle in a fireplace.
- **Get outside.** Make a point to go outside daily for fresh air or a quick 15-minute walk, especially before the sun sets. Ensure you have the proper clothing, boots and cold-weather accessories to stay warm.
- **Increase the amount of light in your home.** If you cannot go outside, open the blinds to allow more sunlight into your space. Light therapy, or phototherapy, involves sitting in front of a bright light box that mimics natural sunlight, and it can help regulate the body's circadian rhythm and alleviate symptoms.
- **Exercise regularly.** Physical activity is a powerful mood booster. Regular exercise, whether a brisk walk, yoga or a gym workout, can help release endorphins. These natural mood lifters can help combat the lethargy of winter blues and SAD.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** Nutrition plays a crucial role in mental health, so consuming a well-balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins is important. Omega-3 fatty acids in fish, flaxseeds, walnuts and edamame may also contribute to mood stability.
- **Establish a routine.** Creating and sticking to a daily routine can provide structure and stability, which is particularly beneficial during the winter months. Consistent sleep patterns, regular mealtimes and a structured daily schedule can help manage winter blues symptoms.
- **Socialize and seek support.** Maintain social connections, even when the inclination is to hibernate. Surrounding yourself with supportive friends and family can provide emotional support and combat feelings of isolation. Consider joining clubs, classes or support groups to stay socially engaged.

Summary

While the winter blues can cast a temporary shadow, incorporating self-care strategies into your lifestyle can help brighten your days and lift your spirits. Remember that seeking professional help is always an option if symptoms persist or worsen, especially if you're dealing with more than the winter blues. By taking proactive steps to care for your mental well-being, you can navigate the winter season with resilience and a positive mindset.

If you're feeling blue this winter, and the feelings last for several weeks, talk to a health care provider. Additionally, if you're concerned about your mental health, talk to your doctor or a licensed mental health professional, or contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Helpline by calling 800-662-HELP (4357).

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