



FEELING THE Winter Blues?

TIPS FOR FIGHTING SEASONAL DEPRESSION

Almost all of us here in Wisconsin experience a little “cabin fever” at this time of year. But for some people, the winter months can bring symptoms of depression, known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

“Where we live, if you aren’t a little sick of winter by February, you’re in the minority,” declares **Dr. Don Ferguson, PhD, with Dean Health System**. “People who are struggling with Seasonal Affective Disorder, however, generally start feeling symptoms already in the fall or early winter. Symptoms usually persist until about April.”

While symptoms begin in fall, the worst months for SAD sufferers tend to be January and February.

Seasonal Affective Disorder

“Seasonal Affective Disorder is a type of depression that is cyclical in nature tied directly to the change in seasons and linked to a loss of sunlight,” explains Dr. Ferguson. “A primary theory regarding the cause of SAD is that sunlight stimulates the production of serotonin and melatonin, two hormones that help regulate mood and energy levels.” SAD is significantly more common in northern climates around the world. Symptoms range from mild to debilitating.

The National Institute of Health estimates that more than 36 million Americans suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder. While there are two major types of SAD – winter onset and summer onset – the winter version is much more common and widely recognized.

Common symptoms generally include:

- **Needing too much sleep.** While many depressions cause insomnia, people with SAD tend to sleep more than usual.
- **Lack of Energy and Ambition.** Despite getting plenty of sleep, you continue to feel tired or “heavy” all day.
- **Overeating, especially craving carbohydrates.** Again, while most depressions result in a loss of appetite, SAD causes overeating and weight gain. You may particularly crave comfort foods high in carbohydrates.
- **Sustained Feelings of Sadness.** Like most other kinds of depression, SAD causes feelings of loneliness and despair for more than a few weeks.
- **Lack of Interest in Social Activities.** People with SAD are particularly sensitive to rejection during the winter months and avoid their normal social interests.

- **A Cyclical Nature to Depression.** A “tell-tale” sign of Seasonal Affective Disorder is how symptoms coincide with the onset of winter. Symptoms always appear and disappear at the same times each year.

Prevention and Treatment

There are three basic treatment options for Seasonal Affective Disorder that may be used alone or in combination.

1 Phototherapy. Exposure to full-spectrum light is a first line of defense against SAD symptoms. It is a natural therapy with very few side effects.

2 Medications. “If light therapy doesn’t work,” Dr. Ferguson shares, “then medications usually do.”

3 Psychotherapy. Therapy can help you modify other parts of your life that may impact the symptoms of SAD, such as stress or relationship problems. It’s much like seasonal allergies. You may be able to tolerate hay fever until you add a cat into your home. Now your body has to fight off two allergens and can no longer cope.

“While you can’t necessarily prevent Seasonal Affective Disorder from developing, there are lifestyle changes you can make to help alleviate symptoms significantly,” Dr. Ferguson explains. He recommends the following:

- **Get outdoors as much as possible.** Studies show that a brisk walk for one hour a day can nearly eliminate symptoms. While that may not fit into everyone’s schedule, getting as much natural sunlight during the winter months as possible will definitely help.
- **Increase your exposure to sunlight indoors.** Open window shades at home. On the job, change your work space to include a window if possible.
- **Get Active!** Regular aerobic exercise helps relieve stress and can combat the extreme loss of energy and sense of malaise that can be so strong with SAD.

Don’t Go It Alone!

The most important thing to remember if you are experiencing symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder or any other type of depression is to get help. Dr. Ferguson recommends starting with your primary care physician to make sure nothing medical, such as your thyroid, is causing your symptoms. Then pursue treatment.

“When it comes to any type of depression, people experience a lot of guilt,” shares Dr. Ferguson. “But once they know what they’re dealing with and give up all those labels they’ve placed on themselves, they can usually find simple ways to help themselves cope much better. The treatment options are extremely effective.”

For more information visit deancare.com/mentalhealth

Breast Cancer Stress Management and Relaxation Training (B-SMART)



Having breast cancer can be overwhelming. Come learn stress management strategies and get support from others who are going through a similar experience with breast cancer.

This 10-week group meets once a week and is led by **Janice Cain, PhD**. The next group starts on Friday, March 28 from 8:30-10:30 am.

Please call **(608) 410-2700** for more information or to register.

Let’s Talk Health

Finding Your Bliss & Managing the Rest

**Tuesday, March 11
7 – 8 pm
Dean East Clinic
1821 S Stoughton Rd, Madison**

Find happiness and serenity in life again – or for the first time! **Lisa Rambaldo, PsyD** offers strategies to release tension, let go of things you cannot change and be present in the moment. Restore your emotional balance, live mindfully and feel empowered to move forward towards your goals. Lisa provides a perspective that will have you thinking about life in a whole new way.

The presentation is open to all. Call **(608) 250-1119** to register.