

Winter Months

By Diane Palmer, MSW, LCSW

Are you one of those people who find the colder weather energizing? You probably know someone like that- the kind of person who finds the cold refreshing and enjoys a brisk walk in the morning. Or are you the kind of person who wants to pull the blanket over their head and wake up to a sunny day in May? Are you already counting down the number of days till spring?

Between the colder temperatures, the shorter daylight hours, and the threat of snow creating fear of being unable to get out of the house, the winter is a hard season for many of us in the Northeast. But there are things we can do to help make the most of the winter months. Here are some suggestions:

- take walks outdoors
- listen to music
- exercise
- read a good book
- do a good deed -- give blood, visit a homebound person, welcome a new neighbor
- play with your pets
- organize your closet
- buy yourself some flowers
- cook something different
- make fudge
- cultivate your sense of humor -- watch a funny movie or TV show
- socialize -- get together with friends, go to the clubhouse
- sort through old photos
- join a reading group
- listen to a book on tape
- make soup, and bring some to a neighbor you don't know well
- learn the computer and get online

- shop the garden catalogs
- wear loud colors

For many people the suggestions above can make a difference in making the most of the winter months, while they look forward to spring. However, for some people their adjustment to the winter months is more difficult. Winter blues is a common affliction for those who live in our northern climate. Its clinical name is seasonal affective disorder (or SAD) and up to 5% of the population (especially in northern states) may suffer from it. Seasonal affective disorder is characterized by feelings of sadness and depression that occur in the winter months when the temperatures drop and the days grow short. Women are twice to three times more likely to suffer from the winter blues than men.

While researchers have yet to pinpoint the exact cause of SAD, they believe that increasing levels of the sleep related hormone melatonin may be at the root of the disorder. The more time a person spends in the dark, the higher the melatonin levels. That may be why light therapy is one of the most effective treatments for people with SAD. Natural light is best, and if you can spend an hour outdoors on winter days, you may see an improvement in your mood. For those suffering severe symptoms, phototherapy -- sitting in front of a light box that emits very bright light -- may be helpful.

Some other suggestions that may help include: increasing the light in your house, keeping the windows uncovered, and/or using larger bulbs or fluorescent lights. It may also be helpful to make your house brighter by painting the walls in light colors or getting a light colored carpet.

For more information on Seasonal Affective Disorder or Depression you should consult a mental health professional or speak to your doctor.

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