

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

So Is Winter Finally Starting To Get You Down?

from the American Counseling Association

You seldom, if ever, hear people complaining that spring has hung around too long. But Winter? Yes, skiers may never want it to end, but for most of us, it seems to drag on way too long.

Right about now is when the mid-winter blues become most common. They can make you feel sad or lacking for energy, yet apparently for no real reason.

The name that mental health experts use for this condition is Seasonal Affective Disorder, or S.A.D. They believe it's tied to the reduced amounts of sunlight and activity that most of us face in the winter.

It's estimated that about 9% of the population in the northern parts of the country have the winter blues, but even in southern states such as Florida, an estimated 1.5% of people suffer from this condition.

For most people, S.A.D. takes the form of mild depression. Symptoms can be reduced energy, decreased participation in once-liked activities and loss of interest in what had normally been enjoyable.

But in some cases, S.A.D. can be strong enough to cause severe depression, severe enough to raise the chances of suicide or possibly require hospitalization.

Fortunately, there are ways to fight these mid-winter blahs. One simple remedy is getting out more into the daylight. Researchers report even a ten minute exposure to the sun can help brighten a person's mood and overall attitude.

There's also evidence that increasing your level of exercise can help limit those winter blues. Even on the coldest days, just bundling up and getting out for a walk or to play with the kids or dog can improve your day.

It also helps to put extra effort into activities you know bring you joy. Getting together with family or friends, going to a movie, working at a favorite hobby, or just lunching with someone special, can all help raise your spirits. What you want to avoid is withdrawing and sitting on the couch focusing on feeling blue.

So if winter has you a little down, fine. But if you find that your winter blues, or those of someone close to you, are severe enough to truly affect your life negatively, talk to your family physician or consult a professional counselor.

From counseling, to various light treatments, to pharmaceutical therapies, there are a variety of options that mental health professionals have available to help keep S.A.D. from ruining your life.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACACorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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