

UW Health: Psychologist shares tips for coping with the winter blues

Posted on Friday, Nov 5, 2021

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MADISON, Wis.— With daylight saving time ending this weekend, the colder winter months ahead, and the pandemic still bringing clusters of stress for people of all ages, the cumulative effect can be a trigger for developing seasonal affective disorder (SAD).

SAD is a recurrent form of depression that occurs primarily in winter months. Symptoms of SAD include feeling down, loss of interest or pleasure in things usually enjoyed, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, weight and sleep disturbance and a sense of hopelessness. SAD affects about 4-6% of the US population, while 10-20% have a milder form with the greatest percentage occurring in northern climates. SAD is found most in younger people between the ages of 18 and 30, and women are at a greater risk than men.

According to Shilagh Mirgain, distinguished psychologist at UW Health, there are several things people can do to help them cope with the winter blues this time of year.

- **Stay Connected:** Winter can bring decreased socialization or social isolation. Socializing contributes significantly to maintaining our well-being and a positive mood. Think about how to make plans in a safe way that works for the group, whether that means a gathering that is small, distanced or outdoors.
- **Light Therapy:** Because the shortened daylight hours during fall and winter can disrupt natural circadian rhythms, exposure to light can be beneficial. Mirgain suggests increasing time outside in the sunlight when weather allows. Open your curtains in the morning to let in natural light. Enjoy a meal or read a book by the window. Light therapy has also proven to be effective for

certain individuals with SAD. It involves sitting in front of a special box with a full spectrum light bulb for about 30 minutes a day to counter the effects of SAD. Before using light therapy, speak with your physician.

- **Exercise:** Exercise has been shown to reduce and prevent depression. If you are able, get outside and do a winter sport like hike, ski or snowshoe, or just take a walk during your workday. Create a routine that includes both aerobic and resistance training. To get the most benefit, exercise at least three times a week for at least half an hour at a time.
- **Vitamin D3:** Consume foods rich in vitamin D3 to counter the lack of sun exposure. Fish and mushrooms are great sources of D3. Talk with your physician to see if D3 supplements are right for you.
- **Self-Care:** Maintain your routines, especially your sleep/wake cycle, practice stress management skills, eat nutritious foods, watch your alcohol intake, learn a new skill or plan some things during the winter to look forward to and get excited about.

If your symptoms of depression are not subsiding and causing distress or impairment, don't hesitate to seek professional help. Therapy and medication are two effective treatments and it's important to speak with a physician to find the most appropriate treatment for you.

Mirgain is available for interviews today between 10:30 a.m.-12:45 p.m. or 4-4:30 p.m.