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Life Lines

Improving Your Quality of Life — One Step at a Time

Overcoming the Winter Weather Blues

It's colder and darker than usual — are you feeling down in the dumps?

Most people are affected in some way, by a change from fall to winter — after all, it can't be warm and sunny all the time. In the winter, days get shorter and temperatures drop. However, just *how* affected are you by winter weather? Are you eating more? Feeling very sluggish? Maybe you feel irritable and unhappy? If so, you may have a slight touch of 'the winter blues'. Do these feelings last a long time, and come back every winter? If so, you may be affected by **Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)**: a mood disorder in which people, who have normal mental health throughout most of the year, experience depressive symptoms during changes in season.

Although the winter blues and SAD are terms that are often used interchangeably, they are slightly different in nature. For instance, those with the winter blues may find they eat and sleep slightly more in winter. They also dislike the dark mornings and short days. Some of their normal feelings, daily routines, or actions are slightly affected, but not compromised.

On the other hand, SAD is a clinical form of depression. It has similar symptoms to the winter blues, but they are more severe. SAD often results due to a lack of light, and it prevents people from taking part in their normal lives — making it difficult to cope with things such as work, and can put considerable strain on relationships. Symptoms also occur year after year, and begin to lessen in the spring, when the amount of sunlight increases each day.

Want to know if you are affected by SAD or the winter blues? Some common symptoms are mentioned below.

- **Inability to concentrate**
- **Sadness or despair**
- **Weight gain**
- **Irritability**
- **Increased sleepiness or lack of energy**
- **Decreased interest in work and social activities**
- **Increased appetite and constant cravings for sweet and starchy foods**

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Once we are clear on what the winter blues and SAD are — we can then turn our attention to overcoming them. There are a number of things that you can do to brighten your body and mind. Below are some tips.

- **Keep Moving.** Exercise is a known mood enhancer, raising the brain's levels of serotonin and endorphins. Try to include 30 to 60 minutes of activity in your day. This doesn't necessarily mean going outside, if you do not like the cold. But if you like to watch television, try things like walking on the treadmill, or jogging on the spot.
- **Watch What You Drink.** Avoid alcohol, and watch your intake of caffeine. It can affect your sleep and make you feel groggy and grumpy. On the other hand, make sure you're drinking enough water.
- **Snack Sensibly.** Simple carbohydrates like chocolate will raise your blood sugar levels fast, and then just as quickly crash you down. Choose complex carbohydrates, fruits, and vegetables instead — like apples, carrots, whole-wheat crackers and multigrain breads. They will help to keep your energy up, and prevent the crash.
- **Be Social.** Many people socialize less throughout the winter months, but isolating yourself can worsen depressive symptoms. Find reasons to get out of the house, like joining a community club or taking a class. Even planning a visit to out-of-town friends can help break up the winter.

SAD can be difficult to live with, but it is highly treatable. Some options are listed below.

- **Phototherapy (Light Therapy).** Light therapy is one of SAD's most effective treatments — exposing you to very bright artificial light for roughly 20 minutes to two hours a day. The equipment is available for home use, or for use in a clinic. Contact the Assistance Program or a health professional, for additional information.
- **Cognitive Behaviour Therapy.** This form of therapy works to replace negative thoughts with more positive ones. It can be used in conjunction with light therapy, and according to some, is the most effective way of treating the disorder.

It's perfectly normal to feel a little sluggish or down in the dumps during a long winter. More often than not, these feelings fade quickly, and do not have a tremendous effect on our day-to-day lives.

If a lack of sunshine, cold weather and consistently grey skies have a much larger effect on us, fortunately there are some things we can do to help ourselves. If we are conscious of what these things are, we can successfully navigate cold weather and the change in season each year — while we wait for the sun to come out, once again.

For more information, to book a counselling session, or to access any of your EFAP services our Client Services Representatives are ready to speak with you 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in English or French. All calls are completely confidential.

1.800.663.1142
1.866.398.9505 (Numéro sans frais - en français)
1.888.384.1152 (TTY)
604.689.1717 International (Call Collect)
www.homewoodhumansolutions.com

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