

Beating the Winter Blues

Winter is well and truly upon us. Whilst we grumble about the colder weather and the shorter days, there are lots of things to enjoy; cold crisp mornings, our magnificent snow-capped mountain, warm woolly jackets and beanies, winter food, warm fires and (for some) the footy.

Winter is also a time when some people experience a lower mood than usual. This can be a result of feeling locked indoors, deprived of usual outdoor pursuits, or grey skies and leaving and returning home in the dark. Wet washing hanging around the house and the mid-year power bill can also leave us all feeling a little out of sorts.

Occasionally the winter blues can become a serious health issue. Sometimes called Seasonal Affective Disorder, SAD is a type of depression that occurs at this particular time of year when the days get shorter and colder. And notably, people who live further from the equator (i.e. us) are more vulnerable.

Symptoms may be mild or more serious and include feeling grumpy or moody, experiencing a loss of interest in activities, weight gain, craving for carbohydrate rich foods, sleeping more and difficulty concentrating. The causes of SAD or Winter Depression as it is also called, are not clear but experts believe it relates to the lack of sunlight exposure, which may in turn affect wake sleep patterns, and mood affecting chemicals in the brain. Lower vitamin D levels are also linked to SAD.

Everyone feels sadness from time to time, but a shift in mood or a persistent low mood which lasts for 2 weeks or more should always be reported to your GP for further investigation.

There are things we can all do, however, to help us through the colder months and keep us feeling positive. For example:

- Have things to look forward to. Plan a weekend outing out of the house. Maybe a “hot chocolate/coffee date” at the nearest café. Even better visit a nearby park where the children can run around.
- Seek out the winter sun. Get out on the bikes or go for a family walk when that glorious Hobart sun is shining. The benefits of exercise aside, the activity will warm you up. The sunshine also elevates Vitamin D levels and is known to lift mood.
- Make a point to catch up with friends. When it’s cold, it’s too easy to stay inside by the heater and become socially isolated, potentially increasing the risk of depressive feelings and thoughts. Meeting up with friends can mean anything from organizing a winter BBQ somewhere in our amazing wilderness (the waterfalls are much more impressive in the winter), or a movie marathon snuggled up on the couch.
- Dress for the cold. There is a cliché which says, “There is no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing.” There may be some truth in this so embrace the extra layers. Add colour as well as warmth. Scarves, gloves, beanies and boots can all add fun and colour.

- Embrace the season. Go to the mountain and play in the snow. Get the gumboots and umbrellas out and go for a walk in the rain. Jump in a few puddles. Make it an adventure.
- Bring some colour and cheer indoors. Put some fresh flowers in the house, bright towels in the bathroom and your most colourful doona covers on the beds.

Let us also be mindful of those who do not have the beanies, the warm house or the nourishing soup. Winter is a most appropriate time to dig deep for our local charities that provide food, warm clothing, blankets and financial assistance to those families who struggle.

Andrea Maver and Gai Bath

amaver@smc.tas.edu.au

gbath@smc.tas.edu.au

SMC Counsellors