

## Defeating the Winter Blues



We are conscious that winter is just around the corner and this can be a great time to begin thinking about (and planning) how we can maintain good mental health practices. In Tasmania we experience some of the coldest climate conditions in Australia, and these conditions can increase the risk of developing a mental health condition called Seasonal Affective Disorder. Each year around one third of Australians experience seasonal affective disorder, which is similar to 'the winter blues'.

Do you experience any of the following symptoms during winter?

- Sadness or feeling depressed most days
- Feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness
- Reduced energy
- Loss of concentration or interest in activities
- Difficulty sleeping or oversleeping
- Loss of appetite or overeating
- Weight loss/weight gain
- Suicidal thoughts

While it is normal to experience some of these symptoms, if you are experiencing a handful of these symptoms and they persist for more than two weeks then you may be at risk of developing seasonal affective disorder. It is important over the next few months to look out for these symptoms in ourselves and the loved ones around us. It is anticipated that for some of us, the winter blues may be kicking in a bit earlier than usual due to the COVID-related restrictions which have added extra challenges to managing our mental health.

How do we combat the winter blues? There are four key factors we would like you to focus on maintaining over the coming months to help avoid the winter blues.

## **1. Daylight**

Lack of sunlight is one of the biggest causes of seasonal affective disorder. The lack of light upsets the sleep-wake cycle by changing our circadian rhythms (our internal 24-hour cycle). It is also believed to cause problems with a brain chemical called serotonin that affects mood and the hormone melatonin that our bodies secrete at night.

So, what can you do? Increase your vitamin D intake. Make your environment sunnier and brighter. Open blinds, trim tree branches that block sunlight or add skylights to your home. Sit closer to bright windows while at home or in the office. Increase the light through dawn simulation (e.g. use a dim light which switches on in the morning while you sleep and it gets brighter over time, like a sunrise). And get outside! Spending time outside is a natural treatment for the winter blues, even if the sun's not shining. A brisk morning walk within two hours of getting up is a good way to increase endorphins and lift your mood.

## **2. Exercise**

Physical exercise helps relieve stress and anxiety, both of which can increase seasonal affective disorder symptoms. Being more fit can also make you feel better about yourself, which can lift your mood.

So, what can you do? Exercise regularly. Where possible, exercise outside. Make it fun – do it with the family, a friend, or a pet. Set goals to work towards, use apps to track progress and try new activities to keep the exercise interesting.

## **3. Sleep**

Poor sleep habits can have a huge impact on our moods and mental health. We all need certain amounts of sleep each night to feel well rested, with the majority of us requiring around seven to nine hours of sleep.

So, what can you do? Set regular sleep and wake times each day. Set a nightly routine prior to bedtime to prepare for sleep. Avoid using screens for 30-60 minutes before sleep. Avoid sugary and caffeinated foods/drinks late in the day. Avoid daytime naps. Use stress reduction techniques as part of your night time routine when you are feeling stressed and/or anxious (e.g. mindfulness meditation, reading, listening to music).

## **4. Fun**

In winter we can often feel restricted in our daily activities. Sometimes we can stop engaging in the things that we enjoy that make us happy because of the weather, or because we lose motivation.

So, what can you do? Take advantage of the winter weather. Get outside for the cold crisp mornings, appreciate our magnificent snow-capped mountain, warm woolly jackets and beanies, winter food and warm fires. Have things to look forward to. Make a winter bucket list with things to tick off each week. Plan a weekend outing, maybe a regular hot chocolate/coffee date with family or friends. Use online platforms to start a new hobby (e.g. join a book club, do yoga classes, learn to knit, learn taekwondo, make some TikToks, get cooking, learn to play an instrument or research countries and make travel plans for the future).

We can each make a conscious effort to ensure that this winter is productive and enjoyable, and by doing some of these things we will have a better chance at defeating the winter blues!

If you are concerned that seasonal affective disorder might be impacting you or a loved one, we encourage you to contact us here at SMC or make an appointment with your doctor.

For more information about seasonal affective disorder, you can view our previous articles on the website here, [www.smc.tas.edu.au/general-parenting](http://www.smc.tas.edu.au/general-parenting).

***Gai Bath (Kinder–Year 6) and Jane Sutcliffe (Year 7–12)***

***SMC Counsellors***

[gbath@smc.tas.edu.au](mailto:gbath@smc.tas.edu.au)

[jsutcliffe@smc.tas.edu.au](mailto:jsutcliffe@smc.tas.edu.au)