Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Seasonal Affective Disorder: Surviving the Winter Blues

Sentiments toward winter are as varied as the temperatures that accompany the season. For many people who dislike winter, the days and months can seem long and sometimes dismal, as they await the change of season.

A major difference between people who are fond of winter and those that are not is that those who enjoy the season can usually be found participating in activities and sports that take advantage of the weather.

While these outdoor sports are attractive to some, they may not be as attractive or easily accessible to others. The key to contentedness with winter is not so much the nature of the activities one engages in but rather the act of “being active.” Participating in pleasurable activities provides us with a sense of energy and vitality that contributes to our overall health and well-being.

Act on "Being Active"

Here are some tips on how you can embrace the season, become more active, and take advantage of all the activity options that winter can offer.

Learning. Set a goal to learn something new and out of the ordinary each winter. For instance, each year, choose a country and become immersed in information about that country's history, geography, language, culture or economy. Or build on knowledge from year to year by learning more about a topic that interests you. Learning can be done independently through reading, using videos, or attending general interest classes such as those offered through community programs.

Relating. Connect with family and friends through simple outings that become “winter rituals.” Consider going on vacation, renting a series of movies or TV shows, or visiting friends or family out of town.

Exercising. Avoid the temptation to become sedentary through committing to a short and brisk walk daily, preferably outdoors for the added benefit of fresh air. A varied exercise program doubles as both a pastime and assists with regulating our mood. Variety helps to keep motivation high, for example, attend classes or use videotapes, seek out nature trails for long walks, swim at the local pool, or take up yoga or boxing.

Contributing. One way to assure a “good feeling” and to look forward to a commitment is by contributing to the well-being of others. This is easily achieved through volunteering. Most communities have a central agency that co-ordinates volunteer opportunities by providing access to a wide range of options to meet an individual's area of interest and time commitment.

Creating. Consider knitting, clogging, pottery, singing, carving, sculpting, painting, refinishing furniture, writing a poem, baking or any other form of creative expression. Creating opportunities to express our creativity through any number of forms can contribute to a fulfilling winter season, and give rise to anticipation and excitement for the winter to follow.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

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Many people experience an extreme and prolonged form of the “winter blahs” that is related to dramatic changes in their brain's chemistry, triggered by diminished sun exposure. This disorder is formally known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), with SAD sufferers experiencing cyclical symptoms beginning in the fall and often persisting until late spring.

Symptoms of SAD are similar to those of depression and other ailments, with the distinguishing feature of SAD being the seasonal time frame. SAD sufferers frequently experience:

- Feelings of sadness
- Tiredness and fatigue during the day
- Cravings for carbohydrates with overeating and weight gain
- A loss of interest in things usually found pleasurable
- A decline in sex drive

Individuals experiencing feelings of sadness or any of the other symptoms noted above are encouraged to seek the assistance of a physician or a professional counselor.

Lightening Symptoms of SAD

For those diagnosed with SAD, significant improvement of symptoms has been experienced through a treatment plan that may include antidepressant medications, light therapy or professional counselling, and often a combination of the three interventions.

Light therapy can be useful in relieving symptoms of SAD, with the intensity of the light source and distance from the light source varying according to the individual. Spending as little as a half-hour each day exposed to prescribed lighting can lighten the symptoms for SAD sufferers.

Professional Counselling

Life often presents most of us with problems from time-to-time that are distressing, such as with SAD. For individuals with SAD, counselors can assist by providing emotional support, developing strategies for managing the feelings of sadness associated with SAD, and assisting in improving the quality of the individual’s day-to-day life.