

As we get ready to adjust our clocks back for Daylight Saving on November 3rd, 2024, we will want to think about how we can prepare ourselves to cope with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) or more commonly referred to as the Winter Blues.

It is estimated that about 10 million Americans are impacted by SAD, according to Boston University. There is a strong link to less sunshine equals less serotonin which equals the potential for getting the Winter Blues. Simply put, serotonin regulates mood, which the sunlight helps to produce.

The further one lives from the equator the more they are prone to experiencing SAD given the decreased exposure to sunlight. So, for those who live in the cold northeast, with diminished sunlight combined with the cold grey days of fall and winter, you will have to be very deliberate to get some sunlight several times a week to combat potential SAD.

What can we do to combat SAD? Exercise is always a good choice. If we can exercise minimally 3 times per week, and specially getting our heart rate up, we increase our dopamine levels which reduces stress and depression. Running, very brisk walking, rowing, are just a few examples of ways of getting our heart rates up. It is also important to add some resistance exercise to help keep our muscles and bones strong, particularly as we age. This can be in the form of using free weights, weight machines, etc. Maybe you're not a person who likes the gym and would prefer doing yardwork instead. There are lots of ways to get both your heart rate up and strengthen your muscles and bones while getting your "yardwork to do list" completed. Where I live in the northeast, snow shoveling is what I call affectionately a "free workout"! The trick is to move your body often throughout the dark months to build strength, meaning and purpose. **If you can do any of the above in the sunlight, that is optimal and preferred.**

There are also **light lamps** that we can use that have been shown to help with elevating our moods. Be sure that the lamp **can generate 10,000 Lux and be full spectrum** for best results. I have used light lamps in the past with success, in combination to exercise and good nutrition.

Late fall and early winter are a time to celebrate and get cozy with all the holidays centered around eating and partaking in adult beverages. Coming up real fast are Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years. Not to mention all the sports on the weekends. All of which lend themselves to eating more than usual and oftentimes include drinking alcoholic beverages in excess. In terms of nutrition, we tend to eat more refined carbohydrates and sweets at this time of the year- our bodies are seeking a quick bump in dopamine, and this seems to be our behavior. However, be mindful that those refined carbs and sweets do not help our mindset towards health and instead can contribute towards unhealthy gut bacteria which can lead to depression. We are learning more about healthy gut bacteria and strong mental health and the direct impact food has on our overall wellbeing.

I want to take a moment to talk about alcohol consumption and its direct impact on our mental health, particularly as we head into the holidays. Alcohol is a depressant. It has a funny way of initially making our moods mellow and we tend to have less stress while drinking alcohol. Many people use alcohol specifically for this reason. But it will become a trap very quickly and it will increase your anxiety. I have a saying that I have used in my prevention trainings over the years. It goes like this: "The more you hold

alcohol, the more alcohol holds you". Try and be mindful around your alcohol consumption this holiday season and notice how your mood and mental health improves.

Let's recap what we can do to combat Winter Blues or SAD. Exercise is key, often and in ways that work for you. You increase dopamine when you exercise and that elevates our mood. Be sure to get your heart rate up and strengthen those muscles and bones. Eat lots of plants often and consume refined carbs and sweets sparingly. Remember, we are what we feed our gut bacteria. And as a positive side effect, you will gain less weight during the winter months. Try and consume less alcohol. Get some direct sunlight exposure as much as you can to boost your serotonin levels. Lastly, try and use a light lamp with around 10000 LUX and full spectrum to beat the Winter Blues this year.

No one thing alone I have mentioned will combat the SAD. We need to incorporate as many of these behaviors as we can to get through the dark days of fall and winter. We need to create lifestyle behaviors that improve our mood and can help us from falling into SAD.

If you have tried several of these lifestyle coping mechanisms and are still feeling down and depressed, please reach out to your primary care physician for additional help. You may need some medication to help you get through the winter months and SAD.

And as always, please be on the lookout for your coworkers and offer them help should you notice them struggling with any signs and symptoms of depression.

Local resources to the Postal Service

1800-EAP-4YOU 1-800-327-4968

National Resources

988 Suicide and Crisis LIFELINE

Text 988

Call 988

Chat 988lifeline.org

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