Have you ever felt you have less energy and are more tired or down in the dumps when the cold Winter months arrive? You may be surprised to know that this is actually a normal and natural response in the colder months, as the days get shorter and there is less sunlight. As such we tend to respond with a “hibernating” reaction. The more indoor living we do in Winter also means a drop in our regular activity.

**How do I recognise I might have the Winter Blues?**

The Winter Blues is actually more common that you might think and anyone can experience a bout of it from year to year. There will be fluctuations in your eating patterns (eating more with cravings for carbohydrates), some weight gain, more sleep required than usual, fatigue and a general sluggishness accompanied by a decrease in motivation or interest. While some people manage these fluctuations with relatively minimal disruption to their daily routines, a few people’s Winter Blues symptoms may extend to a more intense
group of symptoms known as Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD.

A bit about Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

In the past, this condition has been referred to as "cabin fever". Those experiencing this severe type of Winter Blues may feel depressed much of the time in the colder months as they find themselves indoors more often. They may have low energy, reduced concentration and problems with sleeping and eating patterns to the point where it can be difficult for them to function at home or at work/uni. During the Spring and Summer months however, they feel well and 'normal' again. Researchers believe that SAD results from the shorter day length in winter and that SAD is more common in northern countries because the Winter day gets shorter as you go farther north. However researchers have also recently found that up to 0.3% of Australian adult populations may also experience SAD symptoms. Although we don’t fully understand why shorter days can cause this type of depression, it seems that the brain’s chemistry can be affected by light which is why we find the “milder” cases of Winter Blues appearing more commonly.

How to beat the Winter Blues

Uni students may be especially prone to symptoms of the Winter Blues, given the long mid-year break from study in Winter and the tendency as such to stay indoors with a disruption to regular study routines. If you find yourself especially prone to this slump during Winter you may like to consider the following tips...

• Ensure you get some exposure to at least one hour of outdoor light each day, preferably in the morning.
• Make an effort to keep up your social life. A decrease in social activities during the Winter can have an impact on your mood and energy levels.
• Exercise! Make sure you keep well and active by continuing activities such as exercise. While more difficult to undertake in the Winter, it can help lift depressive symptoms.
• Keep active - look for everyday opportunities to build activity into your day - raking the leaves, running errands or taking the stairs instead of the lift.
• SAD sufferers may need to undertake light treatment, which involves sitting in front of a portable light box for about one hour each day.
• SAD sufferers also respond well to more standard depression treatments such as cognitive behavioural therapy and counselling.

The encouraging news is that for most Winter Blues sufferers, the symptoms tend to lift as soon as the warmer months reappear. If you have any queries or suspect you may be suffering with a bout of the Winter Blues, ECU Counsellors are available to assist you.

References

More information is available from:


Acknowledgements

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Please note that this tip-sheet provides information and guidance only - it is not a substitute for professional counselling and support.

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