

Have you ever felt you have less energy and seem flat mentally 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, 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?

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

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 is unsurprisingly more common in northern countries. However researchers have also 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. This 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 prone to this slump during Winter, consider the following tips...

- Ensure you get 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 active by continuing exercise. While more difficult to undertake in the Winter, it can help lift depressive symptoms.
- SAD sufferers may need to undertake light treatment. This 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 psychologists are available to assist you.

REFERENCES

More information is available from:

- [Better Health Channel Victoria](#)
- [Beyond Blue](#)

WANT TO CHAT TO SOMEONE?

For a confidential – and free – chat about your general situation, please contact Psychological Counselling Support to make an appointment at any of our campuses.

 counselling@ecu.edu.au  (08) 6304 6706