

By Lauren Abdill
Practicum Therapist
Relate Counseling Center

3 Ways to Combat Seasonal Affective Disorder

For many Minnesotans, the dreariest time of the year is upon us: The excitement of the holiday season has ended and so has the magic of the year's first snowfall. But winter is far from over – and with two more months (at least) of dark days, icy roads and freezing temperatures, many people find themselves battling Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) this time of year.

SAD is a type of depression caused by changes in the season. In most cases, it appears during late fall and winter – the decrease in sunlight during those months can disrupt your body's internal alarm clock and alter levels of serotonin and melatonin. All of those factors can lead to symptoms of depression, including: feeling sad, sluggish, hopeless or irritable; losing interest in activities you once enjoyed; having low energy or difficulty sleeping; and experiencing weight or appetite changes.

If you're experiencing the winter blues, you shouldn't be ashamed – an estimated 10 million Americans experience symptoms every year. And luckily, there are several steps you can take today to get yourself feeling better:

1. **Get moving:** Exercise is one of the best natural remedies for fighting depression because it amps up your brain's production of feel-good chemicals like serotonin and endorphins. Any activity that gets your heart rate up for more than 30 minutes will work. You'll get even more benefit if you exercise outside during natural daylight.
2. **Get sunlight:** Speaking of daylight, you'll want to spend as much time outside as possible so your body can soak up some much-needed Vitamin D. Don't be afraid to bundle up and take a short walk outside – consider finding a walking buddy to make it more tolerable. If it's just too cold to venture outdoors, open up the blinds or drapes in your home and sit by the window. Finally, talk to your doctor about adding a Vitamin D supplement to your daily routine.
3. **Get support:** Talk to your family and friends about what you're experiencing. Depression thrives on isolation, so fostering relationships is a good way to fight it. Make a weekly coffee date with a friend. Join a book club or take an art class. Look for a local depression support group. Your brain is going to tell you to stay shut in your house alone – fight that instinct and reach out to your loved ones.

If you try these lifestyle changes and you're still feeling depressed for the majority of the day, seek professional health. Contact your doctor or a local mental healthcare provider. And remember: If you have thoughts of suicide at any point, it's especially important to reach out to a professional immediately for help.

Sources:

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/depression/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad.htm>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20364651>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder>