

As a Deep Freeze Envelopes Chicago ... Tips to Help Chase Away the Winter Blues

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Most longtime Chicagoans are used to the cold and snow, although this season in particular has been brutal with the polar vortex and far more snow than average. While some people enjoy this extreme change in climate and associate winter with hot chocolate, cozying up to the fireplace, sledding, and other frosty activities, the winter blues negatively impacts others. In some cases this is mild, but in an estimated 1 to 10 percent of the U.S. population, melancholy escalates into a form of depression known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). According to the American Psychiatric Association, 75 percent of those affected are women. The incidence rates vary greatly due to geographic location, so in a warmer climate like Florida, just 1.4 percent of the population has SAD, but in New Hampshire about 9.7 percent are affected.

Although winter depression is still somewhat of a mystery to scientists who study it, they theorize that factors including the brain chemicals serotonin and melatonin, ions in the air, and genetics play a role. Most researchers agree that people who suffer from SAD are sensitive to light, or the lack thereof and many are genetically predisposed to clinical depression. Less light results in lower serotonin levels and darkness prompts the production of melatonin, a chemical that promotes sleep. So the combination of less serotonin and increased melatonin in the body is partially to blame for SAD.

Research has shown that people with SAD feel better after being exposed to bright light. In higher latitudes winter days are shorter, so there is less exposure to the sun. One would expect that a person's mood would improve when lost sunlight is replaced with bright artificial light. But according to experts, the time of day plays a crucial role and the most important time to get light is in the morning.

Alfred Lewy, MD, a SAD researcher at the Oregon Health & Science University, believes that the disorder is caused by a "phase-shift" of the circadian rhythm. Circadian rhythms are physical, mental and behavioral changes that follow a roughly 24-hour cycle. So while the wall clock may tell you it's time to get up, your body's internal clock says you should stay in bed. Bright light in the morning helps reset your circadian clock.

SAD Symptoms

- Depression
- Feeling of hopelessness
- Anxiety
- Loss of energy
- Heavy, "leaden" feeling in the arms or legs
- Social withdrawal
- Oversleeping
- Loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Appetite changes, especially a craving for foods high in carbohydrates
- Weight gain

- Difficulty concentrating

Tips for Combating SAD

- Go outside because there is no substitute for natural light. If you work during the day, try to go for a walk during a break or lunch.
- Use light therapy boxes to help boost your mood when you cannot go outdoors.
- Get regular exercise at least three times a week for 30 minutes.
- Stay social by interacting with family and friends on a regular basis.
- If you suffer from clinical depression, seek professional help. Major depression is a serious condition that affects about 6.7 percent of the U.S. population.

Sources: Huffington Post, Mayo Clinic, WebMD