

Do You Have the Winter Blahs???

Here it is, almost the beginning of a New Year. Christmas, and the stress and anxiety caused by the holiday rush are behind us. Many look forward to the new year with vigor, filled with hopes, dreams, and plans. But others don't view it quite so enthusiastically ... they feel gloomy and worn out. Studies show that while many people were depressed just before and during the holiday season, even more experience depression and emotional disturbances after the holidays. Why? Are these negative feelings something that should be ignored? Will they go away by themselves?

There are three main possible causes for these debilitating feelings when they occur after the holidays. They are: 1) Post Holiday Blues, 2) Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), and 3) Depression. Feeling down and blah for more than a few days should never be ignored because it is an indication that something is not right and, in the interest of good health and well-being, the cause should be determined and treated. As to whether the condition will go away by itself, it depends on the cause.

The symptoms for these three conditions are essentially the same, but treatment differs. Here is a list of symptoms, a brief description of each condition, and tips to help you on the road to recovery

Symptoms

- Feeling down-in-the dumps, sad, gloomy, unhappy.
- Feeling tired, fatigued with little energy, irritable, at loose ends. Don't know what to do with one's self.
- Eating or sleeping too little or too much.
- Having little or no interest in usual activities.

Post Holiday Blues – a mild form of depression that lasts two weeks or so. It occurs after the holidays as a result of physical and emotional stress. The best way to shrug off the blues is to 1) get involved with other activities such as volunteer work, a household project or hobby; 2) visit a friend or relative on a one-on-one basis rather than in a group; 3) travel ... plan a trip; drive to local points of interest, scenic areas, or another nearby city which you can explore. If symptoms become severe or persist more than 2-3 weeks after the holidays, be sure to check with your healthcare professional for diagnosis and treatment.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) – a condition that affects approximately ten million Americans (6% of the population). SAD is caused by chemical changes in the body due to winter's shorter days and lack of bright sunshine. Studies show that the production of melatonin and other hormones in the body is affected by exposure to natural light. As a consequence, when the days become shorter and there is less light, there is less production of melatonin. The reduced melatonin in the body affects how a person feels, and when melatonin amounts are low, symptoms of depression and lack of energy appear.

It has been found that bright light increases production of melatonin in the body and

reverses SAD symptoms. Therefore, light therapy is one of the main treatments for SAD. Exposing SAD sufferers to bright light for several hours a day decreases symptoms. Natural sunlight is more effective than artificial light, and, a routine involving regular outdoor exercise in the morning has helped many people. Artificial bright light (5-20 times brighter than normal indoor lighting) reverses symptoms within 1-2 weeks. Winter vacations in sunny locations are also helpful. Other SAD treatments may include stress management, dietary approaches, and medications. The SAD condition usually clears up in spring when the days become longer. If it doesn't, depression may be the cause, and medical help should be sought.

Depression – a serious condition in which symptoms are constantly increasing in severity and do not go away. Here's how depression works: the symptoms of depression cause you to feel depressed ... because you feel depressed, your body chemistry changes ... because your body chemistry changes you feel depressed which further changes your body chemistry which further makes you feel depressed. In other words, you become caught up in a vicious cycle that causes your depression to gradually worsen. As it does, a tendency develops to push away from your normal activities and lifestyle. Depression can become life-threatening since it affects thinking, feelings, and judgment. Engaging in constructive activities, spending time with people who are uplifting and supportive, and removing as much as stress as possible from your life might help. But if your mood stays down for two weeks or the symptoms increase in severity, professional help is indicated. Medications and planned activities help reverse the depressive cycle and reestablish normalcy.

Additional tips that will help

Whether or not you have The Blues, SAD, or depression, there are certain things that you can do that will always help you to improve or maintain good health. These are:

- Diet.
- Exercise.
- Proper amounts of sleep.

If your best efforts don't help you get rid of the winter blahs, see your healthcare professional for diagnosis and treatment.

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