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Mood dropping with the temperature?

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Suburban Trends

CORRESPONDENT

NORTH JERSEY — It's cold. Bitter cold. The landscape is desolate, the birds have flown south, and the animals are hibernating. There are only a few hours of sun each day and you've got cabin fever. Welcome to the winter blues.

Known in its most severe form as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), the winter blues are more than just cabin fever. According to Shannon Foster, psychotherapist at Evergreen Healing Arts on Route 23 in Pompton Plains, 6 percent of people are affected by SAD, while 14 percent of people get the winter blues.

"The characteristics are very similar," she said. "It's just the magnitude of the characteristics."

According to Foster, symptoms of the winter blues are similar to those of depression and anxiety and can range from tiredness, lethargy and lack of motivation to problems sleeping and trouble eating.

With SAD these symptoms are usually much more persistent than they are with the blues. Those suffering from this more severe condition can also have mood and appetite changes and social problems from not wanting to get out and do anything.

Although the blues can be common, if you feel you may have SAD, do not be afraid to get help. Contact your health care professional.

Whether SAD or the simple blues, Foster feels that it's hard not to feel a change in mood this time of year on some level. If you're hoping to get out of the winter rut, or perhaps avoid it altogether, take heart, there is hope.

### **Catch some rays**

Foster says the main reason for the seasonal shift in mood is lack of sunlight.. The days are getting shorter and colder. Suddenly everyone is spending more time indoors. In addition to losing out on the good feelings brought about by fresh air and sunshine, Foster says direct sunlight helps the body manufacture vitamin D, an essential vitamin for mood regulation.

One of the best ways to beat the blues is to get outside for 10 to 15 minutes per day, preferably when the sun is at its strongest.

Although sunlight that is filtered through a window may feel good, Foster says you will

not get the rays you need unless you are outside in direct sunlight.

Foster soaks in the rays while waiting with her son at the bus stop. When the weather is good, she'll even try to get there a few minutes early. One of her clients cranks up the heat and rolls down her car window on the way home from work every day.

"It is important to leave some of your flesh exposed because that's how the body absorbs the sun," Foster added. "If I have a scarf I'll pull it down to expose my face. If you can, leave your hands exposed."

Since exercise is a great way to boost the body's natural feel good chemicals any time of year, Foster suggests a double dose of mood enhancement by getting exercise out of doors.

If being outside sounds too cold for comfort, Foster suggests spreading out the sun exposure by taking an extra few minutes here and there while walking to the mailbox or warming up the car. Get creative. You don't have to absorb 15 minutes of sun all at once.

If getting outside, even on your lunch hour, is simply not a possibility, Foster said there are also full spectrum lights available that will do the same as natural sunlight in about the same time per day. Although these used to be large bulky and require a prescription to acquire, Foster says they are now smaller and much more accessible.

If you're interested in getting one of these lights search the Internet for companies such as Full Spectrum Solutions, ask about full spectrum bulbs at your local hardware store, or talk to your doctor.

### **Supplement your regimen**

In addition to lack of sunlight, the inevitable shift in eating habits brought about by the cold weather and winter holidays can also be a factor of the blahs.

"I think we all use the holidays as a time to eat sweets and stuff," Foster said.

According to Google Health, craving sweets and carbohydrates isn't just a contributing factor, but it can also be a symptom of mild blues or the more serious SAD. This can make it hard to cut back on wintertime overindulging, but keep in mind that eating carefully can help improve your feeling of wellbeing during these desolate months.

Adding supplements and certain foods to your diet can also help the body get the extra boost it needs to carry you through until spring.

John and Sally Malatras, co-owners of Harvest Moon Health and Nutrition on Marshall Hill Road in West Milford suggest taking Omega 3 and vitamin D supplements, especially during the winter, to help fight off the blahs.

"The foods that we consume should have some warming quality," John added.

It's not just about eating warm or hot foods, but eating foods with spice and heat. Cook with spices such as pepper, ginger and cayenne pepper. John says these foods help increase circulation, immune response and the body's core temperature so it can function

more efficiently in the cold weather.

"When you are eating cayenne peppers you can visualize yourself in Acapulco," John added.

Foster stresses the importance of maintaining your routine of healthy eating habits and vitamins and supplements, but if you need a little extra boost, there are a few items on the market that can help your regular routine.

John suggests either St. John's Wort or an herb called rhodiola rosea, commonly known as artichoke root or golden root.

"Rhodiola rosea is a therapeutic tonic herb helpful for elevating a person's mood and feeling of vitality," he said.

According to John, rhodiola rosea helps manage serotonin and dopamine levels while supporting adrenal function, and he prefers this herb before St. John's Wort. When shopping around, he says to insist on a brand that is "full spectrum extract" in order to get the best benefits with respect to mood.

Foster suggests Holy Basil or SAM-e supplements. For those who are really struggling, however, seeking a professional can help determine if antidepressants are the best road.

### **Just a state of mind**

Like everything, tackling the winter blues with a different mindset can help improve your feeling about them. Foster reminds us that winter is a time of rest. The trees are dormant, animals are hibernating and the landscape looks peaceful under its blanket of snow.


"If we can kind of embrace that for ourselves and take it as a time of rest and relaxation," Foster said. "Then when the spring comes we can be ready."

She adds that an awareness of the season and its limitations can help reduce anxiety when, let's say, an unexpected snowstorm prevents travel. Instead, take the time to implement some of your new year resolutions, finish a project, or simply relax and pamper yourself.

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