

After all the Red, White and Green have gone, are you left with the Blues

by Mercedes Picot, RNCP, ROHP, n.d.

It's so prevalent, it's almost cliché: the winter Blues. The credit card statements are in, someone unplugged the pretty twinkling lights, the bathroom scale has gone berserk and you're not finding much to laugh at in the dog days of a Canadian winter. Unless you're one of the lucky few who found a pair of tickets to Cuba under the tree, these first months of 2011 might find you wondering what happened to the "Happy" in this New Year.



The winter blues, clinically termed Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), afflicts millions of North Americans with percentages nearing double digits in Canada and the Northern U.S. Sufferers repeatedly fall into a slump year after year though most typically enjoy normal mental health when light levels begin to increase. Aside from recurring pessimistic thoughts, symptoms of SAD might include sleepiness and fatigue, carbohydrate cravings and general appetite increase, and difficulty concentrating and socializing.

Some of the major triggers for all types of depression can be traumatic life events such as stress brought on by family discord or financial insecurity. Emotions and expenses have both been known to escalate to unhealthy levels over the Holidays. Other important triggers almost always include nutritional deficiencies, excess sugar consumption and exposure to food allergens. Need I say more about where our common sense and self-discipline fly off to when jolly old Saint Nick is making his rounds?

Hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) and levels of the neurotransmitters, serotonin and melatonin are equally exacerbated by ingesting unhealthy amounts of sweets and/or alcohol and sleep deprivation. Depressed people may have low levels of serotonin - the brain's mood elevating and tranquilizing "drug". When multiple stress factors accompany plummeting levels of vitamin D due to lower levels of sunlight, one might wonder how we don't all end up on life-support for the first three months of the year.

Vitamin D Delivers

I can't say enough on the importance of supplementing with vitamin D and Fish Oils. When we don't spend enough time outdoors during the long winter months, we are likely to become deficient in vitamin D as we don't get enough Ultraviolet-B on our skin.

Vitamin D increases levels of serotonin in the brain and low levels present a major risk factor for depression. Supplementing with 3,000 to 4,000 IU's will give you the most benefit – that's 10 times more than in most multi-vitamins. It sounds like a lot, but that's about how much you get from simply spending 20 minutes outside in the summer sun. There are absolutely no known cases of toxicity at this level. Eating fish offers another nutritional source of vitamin D. For example, 3 ounces of canned wild pink salmon yields about 530 IU of vitamin D and 3 ounces of canned sardines, about 230 IU.

Fish also contain the omega-3 essential fatty acids, Docosahexaenoic Acid (DHA) and Eicosapentaenoic Acid (EPA). DHA can help with a variety of neurological problems while research has shown that depressed people often lack EPA. To get enough DHA and EPA, supplement your diet with fish oil. The Archives of General Psychiatry reports on a study done in 2002 whereby participants who took one gram (1000 mg) of fish oil daily noticed a 50% decrease in symptoms such as anxiety, sleep disorders, unexplained feelings of sadness, suicidal thoughts, and decreased sex drive. Omega-3s are also found in walnuts, flaxseed and chia seed but the plant sources don't contain crucial DHA and EPA.

Eat Well and be Merry

Although overeating is often brought on by depression, a healthy diet containing several key nutrients is not only essential in preventing depression, it's crucial in the treatment of SAD and clinical depression. As blood sugar levels can have a powerful effect on mood, do your best to avoid all forms of sugar, refined flour, processed and junk food. Brown rice is an important low-glycemic whole-grain, which means it releases glucose into the bloodstream gradually, preventing sugar lows and mood swings. Other whole grains include slow-cooking oats, kamut, spelt and quinoa.

Eat foods high in B vitamins – they're essential to a healthy, depression-free brain (avocados, blackstrap molasses, crimini mushrooms, wild salmon, asparagus, avocados, broccoli, organic eggs, sunflower seeds, whole grains, dried beans and peas, organic soy products, cashews, almonds, brown rice, millet, avocados, bananas and unsulphured dried apricots). Consider taking a B-vitamin supplement.

Eat plenty of dark-green vegetables such as peas, asparagus, cabbage, and spinach which are high in folic acid and essential for serotonin production. Eat more phenylalanine-rich foods. This amino acid stimulates the production of the natural mood-boosting neurotransmitters (almonds, avocados, lima beans, peanuts, and seeds).

Eat foods rich in serotonin-enhancing tryptophan. Nuts and seeds are great sources (especially raw unprocessed). Other foods include organic soybeans, turkey, almonds, cabbage, kidney or lima beans, oats, pistachios, poppy seeds, pumpkin seeds, spinach, and whole wheat. The supplement 5-HTP is a useful Tryptophan precursor.

Eat foods rich in magnesium such as black beans, organic soymilk, grain-fed poultry, and halibut. This mineral does wonders for stress levels so get about 400 mgs a day.

Avoid caffeine and alcohol – these substances will only stimulate you for a short period after which your mood will drop like a lead balloon. People who smoke are also more likely to be depressed than non-smokers so avoid tobacco. Unlike other stimulants, natural Cacao releases endorphins in the brain to help improve your mood.

Work it out

Many studies have shown that exercise can be an effective tool for lifting the symptoms of depression and easing the symptoms of SAD. Regular physical activity gets you in the pink by reducing depression, nervous tension, and anxiety, and aiding restful sleep. Engage in regular exercise at least three times a week and take it outdoors especially on sunny days. In a pinch, stretching, some light yoga or deep breathing can quickly turn a blue you into a new you. Music can also have a powerful effect on mood and may be useful in alleviating depression. Take regular music baths with your favourite tunes.

Let Your Light Shine

Because of some vestigial brain wiring, probably connected to hibernation, light levels impact on our pineal gland through the retina of the eye. Many sufferers of SAD find considerable improvement of their symptoms using Bright Light Therapy with a special lightbox or a "full spectrum" lightbulb. These emit more lumens than a regular incandescent bulb. They are commonly available online and at some Health Food Stores and pharmacies. Light therapy can also consist of exposure to sunlight by spending more time outside but bear in mind that uncovering only your face and hands (Brrrr...) are not likely to affect your hormone levels.

Although symptoms of SAD are no laughing matter, doing just that might be your best medicine. Laughter increases brain endorphins that easily contribute to feelings of well-being. Those same hormones also decrease stress, improve blood circulation and digestion. In the long term, regular belly laughs have a beneficial effect on the immune system by releasing neuropeptides that also combat serious illness. Seriously folks, 'tis the season for watching your favourite rib-tickling movies and posting cartoons or funny stories around the office. Above all, a good laugh can make most situations way easier to deal with.

If your schedule permits, do volunteer work - helping others can make you feel wonderful about yourself.

After all is said and done, take a quiet moment and ask yourself whether you're feeling fear, anger, anxiety, loss of control, or shame and why you're having these unwanted feelings. If the strong emotions persist, please consult a therapist or support group.

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