

Seasonal Depression

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“As Winter approaches I get that feeling that I just want to go to bed and stay there until March. Do I have Seasonal Depression?”

This time of year in this part of the country most of us would like to fast forward to the warm, sunny days of spring --- perhaps even summer! So you are not alone in wanting to avoid the cold, gray days we are forced to endure here in the Chicago area. There is a difference, though, between simply not enjoying the weather and feeling hopeless and helpless during the winter months.

- Are you having difficulty getting out of bed and carrying on your typical daily routine?
- Do you find yourself feeling distracted and irritable?
- Has your appetite increased?
- Are you sleeping more?
- Are you avoiding social situations and isolating yourself?
- Do you feel fatigued and your energy level has decreased?

If you answered “yes” to at least four of the above questions, then chances are you’re experiencing what’s commonly known as “Seasonal Affective Disorder.” This differs from Depressive Disorder in that it is only experienced at certain times of the year. It most commonly occurs in the fall or winter and will abate in spring. As many as a half-million people in the United States may experience winter-onset depression. This is a complicated condition as people tend to minimize its impact. After all, who doesn’t want to stay indoors on a cold, blustery day? Who doesn’t eat a little more in the winter months? Who wouldn’t rather stay in bed than face those cold wooden floors?

The problem is that the depression can begin to control you and you begin to separate yourself more and more from everyday routines and relationships. The good news is that there are small, subtle changes you can incorporate into your life to help you return to your normal state of functioning. The following are steps that can help decrease your depression:

- **Exercise:** Research has repeatedly shown how daily exercise increases endorphins which directly affect our mood. This does not mean that you need to begin training for a marathon, but you do need to find something physical to do each day. Get yourself a ‘workout buddy’ to be accountable to. Begin with realistic goals. Start with a goal of 15 minutes a day, three days a week and build from there.
- **Make plans with friends:** Write a list of all the people you know: friends, family, and colleagues. Make goals to contact at least one of them each day. Make plans to meet at least one of them each week.

- **Continue Your Regular Routine:** No matter how difficult, set that alarm and wake up at the same time every day. Go to sleep at the same time each night. Avoid naps. Schedule your morning with something to look forward to. Knowing something pleasurable is waiting for you makes waking up that much easier.
- **Eat in Moderation:** Plan your meals; when you eat on impulse, you tend to eat more than you should and make less healthy choices. Aim for eating little meals throughout the day. Don't deny yourself all pleasurable foods; allow yourself certain "treats" and avoid the all-or nothing approach as this is rarely successful.
- **Drink in Moderation:** Alcohol is a depressant. If ingested in excess it impacts our moods, sleep, appetites and relationships. Reliance on alcohol to function leads to dysfunction.
- **Perform Self-Care:** We are what we think. If we bombard our minds with negativity, our life will be negative. Our self-esteem is directly impacted by how we talk to ourselves. Make affirmation cards to recite to yourself on a daily basis. Say them when you wake up, before you go to sleep, and anytime in between. It can have an amazing impact to begin and end your day with positive thoughts.

If you've tried all these tools and still can't seem to pull yourself out of your depression, then it is probably time to seek some outside support. Mental health counseling for depression is highly effective. Sometimes having outside support and perspective can be just what you need to turn the corner. Light therapy is another option for treatment of S.A.D. and anti-depressant medication might also be recommended if a chemical imbalance is evident. Whether it's subtle changes in your daily routine, going to counseling, or beginning medication, there is help and hope that you won't just survive these winter months, but thrive through them!