

# The SAD Season

## Dealing with the winter blues

By Heidi Smith Luedtke

FEELING FATIGUED and out of sorts? Your mood and motivation may be subject to the season. Experts say that 5 to 10 percent of people suffer from seasonal affective disorder (SAD), and millions more experience milder winter blues.

Common symptoms include low energy, cravings for high-carbohydrate foods such as pasta and pastries, sadness and despair, social withdrawal, loss of libido and difficulty concentrating. Symptoms may appear as early as September; for most people, they arrive in December or January and lift in the spring, says Norman Rosenthal, M.D., clinical professor of psychiatry at Georgetown University School of Medicine and author of *Winter Blues: Everything You Need to Know to Beat Seasonal Affective Disorder* (The Guilford Press, 2005). Rates are lowest at the equator and highest where light is in short supply.

Winter blues often go untreated because people don't realize they are depressed, says Costco member Stewart Shankman, associate professor of psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Gloomy moods may be less noticeable than physical symptoms such as exhaustion, weight gain and sleep disturbances. A seasonal cycle suggests you've got winter blues, not an underactive thyroid, low blood sugar or chronic fatigue. Fight back with the following self-care strategies.

**Lighten up.** Low-light conditions tell the body to produce melatonin, which makes you feel drowsy. Open the shades or go outside for some rays. If you still feel drained, use a therapeutic light box. "Models with intensities from 2,500 to 10,000 lux are considered effective," says Rosenthal.

Thirty years of clinical research demonstrate the safety and effectiveness of white fluorescent light. Start with 15 minutes of therapy in the early-morning hours. If your energy levels don't rebound after a week, increase your light exposure in five-minute

increments. Finding the right regimen is important. Rosenthal cautions, "Too much light can make you feel overstimulated, like you've had too much caffeine."

**Fuel well.** Indulging carbohydrate cravings provides only short-term satisfaction, says nutritional psychotherapist Julia Ross, executive director of Recovery Systems Clinic in Mill Valley, California, and author of *The Mood Cure* (Viking, 2002). Sweet or starchy foods cause blood sugar to spike and then plummet, leaving you wanting another fast fix. A protein-rich diet sustains well-being because it provides the amino acid tryptophan. Without it, the body can't make serotonin, one of the brain's feel-good chemicals. Ross recommends eating 20 to 30 grams of protein per meal to boost mood.

**Supplement.** If your diet is deficient, tryptophan supplements—either 5-hydroxytryptophan or L-tryptophan—may help, says Ross. Vitamins can also improve your outlook. Most people are deficient in vitamin D<sub>3</sub>, which is produced in the body through exposure to sunlight, says Rosenthal. Vitamin D is crucial for calcium absorption, and it also supports heart health and immune system functioning. Get a blood test from your doctor to check your level. Some people report improved mood after taking vitamin D<sub>3</sub> supplements.

**Move it.** Physical exercise is an effective way to banish the blues year-round. Exercise boosts serotonin production, increases oxygen flow to the brain and diminishes the body's response to stress. Good nutrition and sunlight amplify these benefits. Walk, run or cycle outside if possible. Even on cloudy days, the light is much more intense outdoors. A treadmill or stationary bike in front of a light

box is a good alternative if it's too cold or icy to go out.

**Stress less.** Holiday hassles and workplace pressures can make matters worse. "Schedule activities that will give you pleasure in your life," says Shankman. Take a class or work on a project. Go to your book club meeting, even if you're not feeling sociable. People are one of the most powerful and plentiful sources of joy in life. Spend alone

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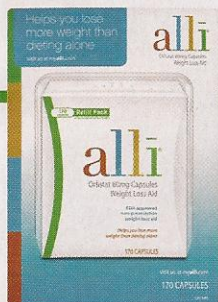
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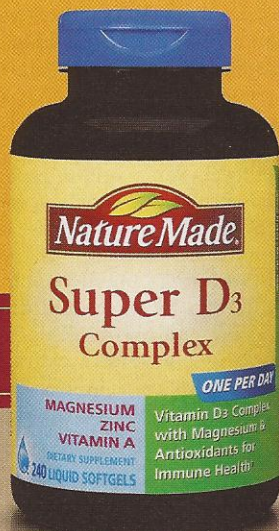
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time in meditation, says Rosenthal. It calms and energizes body and mind.

**Schedule sleep.** Oversleeping can create a vicious cycle. Keep a consistent sleep routine and get up early. "The power of that early-morning light is important," says Rosenthal. It suppresses melatonin and stimulates serotonin production. Unless you're a habitually long sleeper, set your alarm or use a dawn-simulating lamp to wake you after an eight- or nine-hour night. Good habits keep your biological rhythms steady.

**Go pro.** If your own efforts don't do the job or you think about harming yourself, seek professional treatment. Antidepressants are prescribed to treat SAD. A therapist can also help you reframe negative thoughts that drag you down and give homework assignments to encourage effective coping behavior, says Shankman. Don't hibernate until spring. Winter can (and should) be wonderful. ☺

Costco member Heidi Smith Luedtke is a personality psychologist who writes about well-being, self-improvement and relationship skills.

## Get-happy habits to practice all year long

1. Ask for help. Studies show people are twice as likely to say yes to a request for help as you'd predict.
2. Phone a friend. Social connections make life meaningful. A cheerful voice soothes and inspires.
3. Affirm yourself. Post positive self-statements where you'll see them frequently.
4. Keep a gratitude journal. Counting your blessings provides fast-acting, long-lasting fulfillment.
5. Get away. A relaxing vacation may be just what you need. Many people with severe SAD plan annual vacations to high-light destinations.—HSL