

Beating the Winter Blues

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As we approach the shortest day of the year and the temperature continues to drop, it seems we are settling into winter. During this time period, the latitude of New England limits our sun exposure. In Chinese medicine, winter is the time of “yin” when we naturally become introspective and restful before the spark of new life in the spring. It is important to nourish the kidney “qi” (or energy), which is the source of our energy by going to bed earlier and keeping warm. The emotion associated with winter is fear. In western medicine, this may manifest as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

Seasonal Affective Disorder is associated with depression, fatigue, oversleeping and overeating. It affects 4-6% of people in the United States, most often seen in those aged 20-40, women more than men, more often in people living at higher latitudes.

Studies show that light therapy can be a significant therapeutic in treating SAD and depression. Full-spectrum white light (10,000 lux) for 30 minutes every morning can truly make a difference in mood and energy level. Spending some time outdoors everyday is also helpful.

Whole foods like vegetables, fruits, whole grains and protein are essential for optimal physical and mental health. Nutritional deficiencies are common in those with depression. A study showed that those with high docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), an omega-3 fatty acid, have lower rates of depression. Therefore, increasing seafood and fish or taking fish oil as a supplement is recommended. Pasture-raised animals were shown to have more omega-3 fatty acids than those raised on a feedlot.

Food sensitivities may contribute to depression as a result of exorphins, which are small proteins that result from incomplete digestion. Exorphins can decrease levels of specific neurotransmitters thereby creating a depressed mood. The most common food sensitivities are to gluten and dairy. Doing a trial elimination of these foods from the diet may improve mood. Avoiding cigarette smoke, alcohol and cannabis are recommended because these behaviors increase the risk for depression.

B vitamins play an important role in neurotransmitter production in the brain and therefore influence mood. B3, B6, B12 and folate are involved with serotonin synthesis. Vitamin D3 is also involved with the production of serotonin, in addition to many other neurotransmitters and hormones. An overwhelming 80% of patients with depression are deficient in magnesium. Low vitamin E, selenium and zinc levels are associated with depression.

What are some ways to combat the winter blues?

- Go to bed earlier in the winter months, avoiding computer or television 30 minutes before bedtime
- Drink chamomile, passion flower or holy basil tea before bed
- Exercise at least three days per week for 20 minutes
- Adopt a practice like meditation, yoga or qi gong
- Support this time of introspection through journaling
- Eat a diet rich in whole foods, wild fish and a breakfast high in protein
- Consider eating a gluten and dairy free diet
- Avoid cigarette smoke, alcohol and cannabis
- Be mindful of hydration, as indoor heating can be drying

- Use lavender essential oil
- Drink green tea, which has been associated with less depression
- Tonify your immune system by taking elderberry syrup
- Check Vitamin D3 levels
- Consider acupuncture, massage, cranio-sacral therapy or counseling

As a result of less light in winter, melatonin levels are higher and serotonin is lower. Therapeutic interventions to SAD often involve this biochemistry. Various herbs and natural supplements may be useful in the treatment of SAD. The following must be carefully administered by a health care professional. St. John's Wort has been shown to be equally effective as some antidepressant pharmaceuticals. 5-hydroxytryptophan (5HTP), the precursor to serotonin, and phenylalanine and tyrosine, precursors to dopamine and norepinephrine, may also be effective. *Ginkgo biloba* is helpful in treating depression, specifically low libido.

The winter months are great opportunity to rest, reflect and restore! If you are experiencing unusual low mood and fatigue during the winter months, talk to your health care provider.