

Winter Blues: How to Cope With Seasonal Depression



**Johns Hopkins
Student Assistance Program**

Serving Graduate and Professional Students

Winter brings shorter days and less sunlight. For many, the cold weather and diminished hours of light brings about a mild case of winter depression called the winter blues. The National Mental Health Association estimates that 25 percent of the population suffers from this condition. So what exactly is this form of seasonal depression?

Winter Blues

The winter blues is a mild form of depression brought about by the diminished amount of sunlight available during the fall and winter seasons. This lack of light results in a decrease in the production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter responsible for mood, hunger, and sleep. The darker days also signal the brain to overproduce melatonin, a hormone that regulates our circadian rhythm, which determines when we fall asleep and when we wake up. Winter blues typically begin in the late fall or early winter and improve in early spring. Although the winter blues are not as severe as its counterpart, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), or long-term depression, it can change the way a person thinks, reacts, and deals with everyday challenges. Symptoms vary from person to person, but most commonly include some of the following:

- tiredness or decreased energy
- isolation and withdrawal
- apathy
- decreased interest in activities or hobbies
- change in weight or appetite (usually increase)
- problems concentrating at work, school or home
- lower self-esteem, guilt feelings
- sleep problems (sleeping either more or less, or disturbed sleep)
- Difficulty concentrating
- craving carbohydrate

If the winter blues are disrupting your winter solstice, the following tips may help:

Light up your space: Light plays an important role in our health and the amount of time exposed to it affects our performance. Bring as much light into your life as possible. Spend time outdoors during the day. Arrange your home and workplace to receive more sunlight or natural light. For more severe symptoms, consider the use of a 'light box'. Studies have found that those suffering from the winter blues experience relief from this form of light therapy.

Keep active: Exercise releases important endorphins that elevate mood. Choose a physical activity to practice throughout the season. Take a brisk walk, go for a run, take part in winter sports. If outdoor activities do not appeal to you, join a fitness club or start an in-home exercise program.

Eat Well: Eat foods that boost your immune system such as whole grains, pasta, rice, fresh fruits and vegetables, seafood, and lean meats. Avoid high-sugar foods and large amounts of caffeine as these can 'feed' depression and decrease energy.

Get enough sleep: Establish a regular bedtime and get up at the same time each morning. This will give you more energy during the day and reduce feelings of depression. Try to sleep at least 8 hours a night.

Seek assistance: If the feelings associated with the winter blues interferes with your day to day routine or become more severe, seek professional assistance.

The Johns Hopkins University is committed to assisting students in managing the challenges they face during their academic careers. The Student Assistance Program provides support to students in dealing with personal, academic, and relationship problems.

If the winter blues interfere with your ability to focus and perform well, you may benefit from more individualized services. Contact the Student Assistance Program (SAP) at 443-287-7000.

National Mental Health Institute <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

National Organization for Seasonal Affective Disorder (NOSAD) <http://www.nosad.org>

Rosenthal, N. (1993). Winter Blues: Seasonal Affective Disorder, What it is and how to cure it. (1993). New York: Guilford Press.