



Maryville Daily Times, January 3, 2010

Winter Blues Can Hit in January, February

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Albert Camus, a French author and philosopher once wrote “Even in the midst of winter, there is within me an invincible summer”. The first winter my husband and I lived in Germany was an experience. We had been living there for about six months and enjoyed a sunny, beautiful summer and a colorful, crisp autumn. I had just spent my first Christmas away from home and family in the beautiful mountains of Switzerland. Then he left for six weeks of training shortly after the New Year. January was cold, rainy, and dreary that year and the blah, humbug set in. The days were short and filled with gloomy, rainy weather; in fact I think it probably rained almost every day in the month of January. Living in Europe had been thoroughly enjoyable until that point and the winter blues hit hard.

This is not an uncommon phenomenon. As the daylight hours shorten and the weather becomes colder, some people experience a loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed. They may have problems concentrating, sleep more, or feel sad and hopeless. "Winter blues" includes seasonal feelings of sadness or depression that typically increase during the fall or winter months and are relieved during the spring and summer months. Symptoms are most pronounced in January and February when the days are the shortest. There are many possible causes of the winter blues--holiday stress, family conflict, financial stress, and reduced exposure to sunlight. A neurotransmitter called serotonin that regulates mood often decreases with the waning daylight hours of winter and sets the stage for seasonal sadness. A great majority of the population experience some seasonal changes in feelings of well-being and behavior. At one end of the spectrum are those who experience few seasonal changes and at the other end are those with SAD or Seasonal Affective Disorder.

Symptoms of SAD may include oversleeping, difficulty waking up in the morning, and overeating characterized by cravings for carbohydrates which often contributes to weight gain. Other symptoms include lack of energy, inability to concentrate, difficulty completing tasks, and withdrawal from friends, family, and social activities. All of this contributes to the sadness, pessimism, and lack of pleasure typical of Seasonal Affective Disorder and depression. It is essential that SAD sufferers acknowledge and treat their symptoms. Paying attention to one's cyclical depression and taking steps to minimize its effects helps to put people more in control of their emotions and can improve their quality of life.

There are some ways in which the winter blues symptoms can be alleviated. Exercise or spending time outdoors or in places with windows and exposure to daylight raises the level of endorphins. Journal your feelings daily in order to identify and track mood and other symptoms. Give yourself permission to feel and stay in touch with your feelings. Make decisions based on what is healthy for you and nurture yourself. Develop a support system by strengthening important relationships and staying connected with others. In some cases individuals may need to consider counseling or antidepressants to address issues such as stress, extreme sadness or seasonal emotional triggers.

Once I realized the winter blues had set in during that first January in Europe, I began exploring my surroundings in search of the many joys that may be found in winter. I walked my neighborhood, read books and enjoyed the solitude. Winter days are perfect for curling up with a good book and winter nights are often clear and crisp for walking and rediscovering nature. If you find yourself overcome with winter blues, take heart. The shortest day of the year, December 21st, has past and the days are already getting longer. Find ways to seek comfort in the beauty of winter and discover your own invincible summer.