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Got the winter blues?

You might have seasonal affective disorder -- but there's help

Heather Ashare / Special to The Detroit News

During the past two years, Andrea Berez, 34, of Royal Oak has spent 14 months in Fairbanks, Alaska, where she conducted linguistic research on native Alaskan languages.

Despite the beauty of Alaska, with just three and a half hours of dim sunlight a day and an average temperature of 6 degrees, she found herself in a dangerous cycle. The extreme cold would force her to stay inside, and then feelings of boredom and sadness would set in.

"It was often difficult for me to get out of bed in the morning, and it was easy to feel lonely," Berez says.

Even if you don't live in Alaska, the harsh effects of winter can take their toll on you mentally and physically. But with a little education and support, you won't feel like you need to spend your winter in hibernation.

What is SAD?

According to Laura Segal, a licensed therapist from Apex Behavioral Health in Plymouth, seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that occurs during the fall and winter months, with symptoms being most severe about now. Episodes of depression can last for up to six months, she says.

"During the winter, just as many animals hibernate and reproductive activity slows, there are similar changes in our internal biological clocks," Segal says.

Diagnosis of SAD occurs when an individual experiences depression for two consecutive years during the seasonal months, Segal says.

Who gets it?

According to the American Psychiatric Association, the farther someone lives from the

equator, the more likely they are to develop SAD. The organization also estimates that 25 percent of Americans living in northern regions experience the winter doldrums, a sub-clinical level of SAD.

The condition tends to affect men and women differently. In males, the prevalence of SAD remains steady even as an individual's age increases.

"It tends to be more prevalent in women in their middle to late thirties. But as women get older, it decreases," Segal says.

Prevention

From food to friends, there are a few things you can do to prevent developing an episode of depression if you know you are prone to getting the winter blues.

Avoid high-carb comfort foods. Reaching for doughnuts or bowls of macaroni and cheese is often a typical reaction when we feel an emotional void. But these are not the wisest food choices to make when we are feeling down.

"Whenever we eat overly processed food, we experience large swings in our blood sugar that affect our moods by making them more unstable," says registered dietitian Deralee Scanlon, manager of professional and consumer education for Nature Made in California.

Instead, try foods such as turkey, dairy products, wheat germ and bananas that contain tryptophan, an amino acid that triggers a release of serotonin, the feel-good neurotransmitter in the brain.

Up the omega-3 fatty acids. A recent study from the University of Pittsburgh found that low levels of omega-3s were associated with symptoms of depression and moodiness, while people with higher levels reported being more content. Salmon, tuna, walnuts and flaxseed are all excellent sources, Scanlon says.

Her other favorite mood-boosting foods include blueberries, seeds, nuts, dark chocolate and green tea in moderation.

Treat yourself to mood-lifters. In addition to food choices, she recommends having certain lifestyle actions in place as a way to prevent SAD. Scanlon suggests doing small things such as getting a massage or a pedicure and surrounding yourself with supportive friends and family.

"Pick up the phone and call a friend whom you haven't spoken to in awhile. It's so important to take your mind off of yourself and engage with others when you are feeling down," Scanlon says.

Treating SAD



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If you can't enjoy winter surroundings such as these, and you're blue, you should get help from professionals. [See full image](#)

SAD symptoms

According to the American Psychiatric Association, the most common symptoms of seasonal affective disorder can include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Fatigue
- Lack of interest in normal activities
- Social withdrawal
- Weight gain
- Craving foods that are high in carbohydrates

Cheer up, Charlie!

The days really are getting longer. In Detroit, we have an hour and 45 minutes more of daylight today than we did Dec. 20, and we'll have an hour and 19 minutes more on March 20. Check the U.S. Naval Observatory Web site at

http://aa.usno.navy.mil/data/docs/Dur_OneYear.html to see how quickly the days are getting longer.

Here are ways to add life to the drab winter days that remain:

- Take a walk or go for a jog.
- Get a new haircut.
- Buy something colorful such as a ruby red blouse or a set of bright yellow bath towels.

Resources

The Seasonal Affective Disorder Association at www.sada.org.

"The Omega-3 Connection: The Groundbreaking Anti-Depression Diet and Brain Program" by Andrew Stall, M.D. (Free Press, \$7)

"Calm Energy: How People Regulate Mood with Food and Exercise" by Robert E. Thayer (Oxford University Press, \$18.95)

"Winter Blues: Everything You Need to Know to Beat

Experts agree that light therapy is the best treatment for SAD.

Dr. Michael Terman, the director of the Center for Light Treatment and Biological Rhythms at New York-Presbyterian Hospital, Columbia University Medical Center, recommends getting 30 minutes of bright light therapy upon waking each morning.

According to Terman, if that does not work, then two new clinically tested alternatives are also available. They are dawn simulation and negative air ionization used individually or in combination.

Terman also says that being sedentary intensifies the depression. He suggests getting a daily aerobic workout even if it is just power walking outside in the cold.

Berez used the full range of tools to lift her spirits, avoiding junk food and alcohol and exposing herself to 25 minutes of daily artificial light. She also exercised inside and outdoors.

"Ashtanga yoga and cross-country skiing were my best remedies. Skiing allowed me to get as much sunlight as possible, and yoga kept me balanced and strong," Berez says.

Heather Ashare is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.

More Fitness Headlines

Seasonal Affective Disorder" by Norman E. Rosenthal, M.D. (Guilford Press, \$15.95)

To determine if you suffer from SAD, take a free online self-assessment questionnaire given by the Center for Environmental Therapeutics at www.cet.org.

To attend a support group through William Beaumont Hospital call, (248) 689-6110.

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