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Dealing With The Wintertime Blues



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Dealing With The Wintertime Blues

Do you feel depressed during the wintertime months? If so, you're not alone! Studies show that up to 50% of the population experiences a change in mood during the wintertime.¹ There are many factors that combine to cause the wintertime blues; however, a decrease in the amount of sunlight is the main factor. While half of the population notices a decrease in mood during the months from October to March, some people are especially sensitive to the decrease in sunlight and are prone to Seasonal Affective Disorder (S.A.D.).

The symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder include:

- Sleep problems – cannot get out of bed, oversleep, need to nap often.
- Overeating – carbohydrate cravings which lead to weight gain.
- Depression and anxiety – despair, guilt, hopelessness, restlessness.
- Interpersonal problems – irritability, avoidance of social situations.
- Difficulty concentrating – forgetfulness, hard to focus on tasks.
- Lethargy – fatigue, too tired to do much of anything, everything is an effort.
- Physical Symptoms – lowered immune system, aches and pains.

It is important to note that experiencing a mood change during the wintertime doesn't necessarily mean that you have Seasonal Affective Disorder. However, if you feel depressed for two weeks or more, you should consult with your family physician or a Christian counselor for an evaluation. Anyone who is experiencing thoughts of death or suicide should seek professional help immediately. It is common for individuals who are currently dealing with depression (and those with a history of depression) to find an increase in depressive symptoms during the winter months. If you are currently taking antidepressant medication, it may be necessary for you to contact your physician about adjusting the dosage in order to deal with these seasonal changes.

Light is the key: The best and most reliable treatment for S.A.D. is to get more exposure to light. Early morning sunlight seems to be especially helpful. Unfortunately, many of us cannot move to a sunny climate for the winter. Therefore, use of a commercially available light box is often the first step (www.apollolighttherapy.com). Therapeutic light is generally considered to be between 2,500 and 10,000 lux ("lux" is a measure of light intensity).² For comparison, the amount of light in a typical home at night averages between 300 to 500 lux, whereas the lux of a sunny summer day can be over 100,000 lux.

There are other simple things you can do to increase the amount of light you receive. Each day, open your window shades and let in as much light as possible, especially in the morning. Whenever possible, get outside to enjoy the fresh air and be in the sunlight. When you must be indoors, do not sit in dim rooms. Try to surround yourself with an environment that is full of light. Make your home feel colorful and alive. Paint dark colored walls a lighter color that reflects more light. Grow some indoor plants, and do whatever you can to make your surroundings more colorful. Some people describe being stuck inside as similar to being in prison. When considering that they sit in dark rooms with little light, window shades drawn, and no contact with people outside their home, it isn't difficult to see why it would seem like a prison.

The remainder of this article is divided into four areas – biological, emotional, relational and spiritual – with corresponding action points to help you combat the wintertime blues.

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Biological: The Bible calls our bodies the temple of God (*1 Corinthians 3:16*). The biological area deals with making sure the temple, your body, stays healthy with exercise, rest, and nutrition. It's sometimes easy to forget about taking care of your body when you're feeling good. Maybe we are only health conscious when we're sick. While this kind of health care is easy to do, it's also the best way to forget to take preventative measures that can keep us healthy.

Stay Active. Many of our activities change during the winter. Time previously spent taking walks, riding bikes, mowing the yard, or working in the garden is now spent indoors. While activities may change during the winter, it is important to remain active. Walking in a mall, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, and doing aerobics are just a few ways to stay physically active while remaining indoors. Try to exercise for about 20 minutes at least three times a week. If you have a medical condition or aren't sure what kinds of exercises you should do, talk to your family physician. Most people know that they should exercise, but don't know what to do or when to do it. Setting aside time from your busy schedule to exercise has far reaching benefits. Not only will you feel better physically, but you will also notice that exercise helps elevate your mood.

Monitor Your Sleep-Wake Cycle. Because of the change in the length of days during the winter, your sleep/wake cycle can get thrown off. Many people start to oversleep during the winter months. If you are spending a lot of time sitting and not being physically active, you will tend to slow down and begin to feel tired even after very little physical activity. Don't fall into a pattern of taking naps in the late afternoon or early evening, and especially avoid napping before noon. If you do nap, try to limit the time you sleep by setting an alarm and getting up when it goes off. Sleeping during the times that you would normally be awake can make it difficult for you to sleep restfully through the night. Don't allow yourself oversleep in the morning either. Get up at regular times and have activities planned for your day.

Watch What You Eat. Take time to notice what you're eating. Proper nutrition will help shield you from the wintertime blues. Many people think that the basic food groups consist of candy bars, cookies, ice cream, and soda pop! Also, it's easier to think about eating healthy vegetables when they are growing in the garden; however, don't forget to eat them when your garden is covered with snow. Many people grow accustomed to gaining weight over the winter. While some may joke that the weight they gain is insulation for the winter, it usually has more to do with lack of activity and a poor diet. Also, watch how much caffeine and sugar you are consuming. Using caffeine and sugar to help you temporarily gain artificial energy eventually becomes self-defeating as your body becomes less able to function without them. Making sure your diet is balanced will also help your immune system fight other problems like colds and the flu.

Action Points.

- Consider purchasing a light box.
- Surround yourself in an environment that is full of light.
- Exercise regularly.
- Get regular sleep, but don't oversleep.
- Keep a daily schedule.
- Make sure you have a healthy diet.

Emotional: *Proverbs 23:7* says, "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he." What we think and believe about something determines how we will act and feel. Our thoughts play a key role in our emotions and in battling the wintertime blues. For many people, especially mothers with young children and the elderly, winter can be a time of isolation. Just thinking about winter can bring up a lot of negative images and feelings. You may not like winter, but it is important to see that what you believe about your ability to cope with the situation makes a big difference in how you will deal with it.

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Challenge Negative Thinking. You have two choices in your thinking – Depression Thoughts or Coping Thoughts. If you only focus on the depression thoughts, you will not move yourself past hating your situation to coping with the situation. If you find yourself isolated, lonely, or depressed, refocus your attention on ways to deal with the situation. We call these thoughts “coping thoughts,” because they will help you find ways to deal with your situation. For example, if you are feeling lonely, a depression thought would be, “I’m feeling lonely; I hate this. I have three more long months of winter to go. I’ll never make it.” Notice how hopeless those thoughts are, and reread *Proverbs 23:7*, “*For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.*” Hopeless thinking leads to hopeless living. Let’s compare that hopeless thinking to what Jesus said in *John 10:10*, “*...I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.*” Jesus Himself confronts hopeless thinking. His plan for us is hopefulness, not hopelessness.

Focus on the Positive. *Romans 5:2* says, “*By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*” Let’s use the hope that’s found in that verse to change the hopelessness to hopefulness. A coping thought would be, “I’m feeling lonely and I don’t like it. What can I do to connect with someone else? I can make a phone call, write a letter, or visit my aunt.” Coping thoughts deal with reality and acknowledge how you feel about a situation. However, they don’t leave you stranded in the mire of depression. Think about and plan some positive activities that you will be able to do in the spring. For example, look through some gardening catalogs and figure out which seeds you would like to plant, or get some information about places you would like to visit and start planning your summer vacation! *Philippians 4:8* gives us a guide to the things we should be thinking about, “*Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.*” Always remember *Philippians 4:13*, “*I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.*” Keeping a daily journal is a good way to help you work through your thoughts and feelings. By writing down both the positive and negative things that have touched your life, you will be able to look back in your journal and see how far you’ve come.

Share Your Feelings. It is important to have one or more support people (sometimes called an accountability partner) with whom you can share your feelings. This is a person that you can “check in” with periodically, who will give you open and honest feedback about what they see in you. Bob and Randy met once a week and talked together about how things were going for them. One day during their lunch meeting, Bob asked Randy about some things that he had observed over the past few weeks. “Randy, how are you doing? I mean *really* doing. I’ve noticed that you don’t have your usual energy and that you’ve stopped doing some things you’ve always enjoyed like visiting with people after church and attending our Bible study. Are you feeling all right?” Randy responded, “Bob, I don’t know what’s going on. I feel depressed, and I can’t put my finger on why that would be. Things at work are fine, and nothing terrible has happened, but I just can’t seem to shake the blues.” Over the next several weeks Bob checked in with Randy more often than usual. Randy said later, “Knowing I could talk to Bob about how I was doing made a huge difference to me because I knew that I wasn’t alone in my struggle.” *Ecclesiastes 4:9-10* says, “*Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.*”

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Share and Bear Burdens. While some people find it easy to talk to others about what is going on in their lives, some find it very difficult. *Galatians 6:2* says, “*Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.*” When we read a verse like this, we tend to want to be the burden bearers, but not the burden sharers. How can someone bear your burden if they don’t even know you have one? Often there is a misconception that people who struggle are weak or aren’t as close to God as they should be. First of all, each of us struggles at times, and no one is exempt from being touched by difficulties in life. Second, as *2 Corinthians 1:4-5* says, “*Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ.*” God can use our struggle for a testimony of His grace in our lives. Be on the lookout for people who are going through difficult times and come along side of them. By helping others in their time of need the Scripture promises that we will be taken care of in our time of need.

Action Points.

- Remember that what you think determines how you will act and feel.
- Think about and plan some positive activities to look forward to in the spring and summer.
- Keep a daily journal of your thoughts and feelings.
- Meet with an accountability partner.
- Don’t be afraid to share your burdens with someone you trust.
- Be on the lookout for others whom you can support.

Relational: God created us as relational beings. His desire to have a personal relationship with us underscores how important relationships are to God. Overcoming isolation seems to be a key factor in dealing with the wintertime blues and depression in general. As you read this next section, take an inventory of your relationships to see where you need to expand your focus.

Connect with Your Support Network. When speaking about relationships, one commentator said that we all need a Paul, Barnabas, and Timothy. Each of these men from the Bible represents a different kind of relationship.

- **PAUL:** We each need a mentor who can teach us by example and through their life experiences. Paul encouraged Timothy to keep the faith and then told him how he had dealt with circumstances in his life.
- **BARNABAS:** We each need someone who we can relate to because of similar interests, life stage, or personalities. Diane was a young mother with two small children. Weekly, Diane and Cheryl (also a mother with young children) met for lunch and to spend some time together. When their schedules were too hectic for them to meet up, they always made sure to call each other and give an update on how things were going. This way they could share tips on how to deal with the children as well as share personal matters.
- **TIMOTHY:** We each need a younger person who we can teach. The older teaching the younger is a common theme that runs throughout the Scripture (*Titus 2:3-4*). This could be your children, someone new to your church, a child from your Sunday school class, or someone from a mission or community agency. Showing ongoing interest in someone not only meets that person’s needs for instruction, attention, and companionship, but also allows you to share God’s love with others.

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Prioritize Time to Get Support. Couples need to make sure that they create a balance for meeting both spouses' relational needs. After a hard day at work, a husband may need some time to be alone and recharge. Wives need time alone without the children as well as time with adult company. It is important for husbands to monitor their wives' feelings of isolation year around, but especially in the dark winter months. Couples should also set aside at least one "date night" per month. This is time for the couple to spend alone together without interruption from children, friends, family, or work. Finding time for date nights is difficult, especially for couples with young children at home. Look for couples who could benefit from having a night out alone, and offer to babysit their children. It's a ministry opportunity for you, and a gift that goes beyond a dollar value to a busy and stressed couple.

Action Points.

- You need a Paul – a mentor.
- You need a Barnabas – a friend you can easily relate to.
- You need a Timothy – someone you can mentor.
- Husbands need to monitor feelings of isolation in their wives.
- Couples plan at least one "date night" per month.

Spiritual: While we've saved the spiritual area until last, in many ways it is most important because it ties the other areas together. Most importantly, this area deals with maintaining a personal relationship with Christ.

Keep the Word in our Minds. Having a daily Scripture reading and time for prayer is good advice all year long, but it is especially important to keep up if you're feeling down. Surround yourself in a Christ-centered environment. Post encouraging Bible verses on your refrigerator, car dashboard, bathroom mirror, or other places you pass by often. Take time to memorize Scripture verses that can help you during times you feel blue or are facing temptation. Christian music playing in the background can help focus your mind back to spiritual things (*Ephesians 5:19*). When you're feeling blue, it's much easier to feel like staying home and not going to church. While there are times that you should stay home, such as when you are ill, you should normally push yourself to get out of the house and to church. Not only can you be fed by hearing the Word of God, but also you can encourage and be encouraged by others.

Connect with Others on a Spiritual Level. Having a Bible reading accountability partner is another good way to keep growing in your spiritual walk and encourage another person at the same time. After you finish reading your daily devotion, call up your Bible reading partner and discuss what both of you have read. Talking with another person about what you're reading can motivate you to read daily and at the same time connects you with another person that you can share with and learn from. Also, think of ways to spiritually encourage others. This could be sending notes, seeking out relationships (with new Christians or those with whom you're sharing the Gospel), visiting the elderly, or checking in with your neighbors. Finding ways to encourage others not only helps them fight the wintertime blues, but helps you fight the battle too.

Action Points.

- Set aside time for a devotion and prayer.
- Make sure you are regularly attending church.
- Find a Bible reading accountability partner.
- Look for ways to encourage others in their faith.

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Conclusion: In conclusion, remember that experiencing the wintertime blues is relatively common. If you or someone you know is experiencing symptoms of depression for two weeks or more, contact your physician or a Christian counselor. Depression is a common and treatable problem. Fighting the wintertime blues takes a multifaceted strategy. By identifying both your strengths and weaknesses in the four areas listed above, you can find specific ways to beat the wintertime blues.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Rosenthal, N. *Winter Blues: Seasonal Affective Disorder:What It Is and How to Overcome It*. New York: Guilford Press, 1998.

Light Therapy Products: Apollo Health at www.apollolighttherapy.com or 800-545-9667.

The book listed above and other helpful resources related to understanding and getting help for wintertime depression are available by calling ACCFS or ordering them from our website at www.accounseling.org.

References:

Referencing of these materials is not meant to imply an endorsement by the Apostolic Christian Church of America of the author, publisher, or organization that created the materials.

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1. M. Terman, *Principles and Practice of Sleep Medicine, 2nd Edition* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1993), 1012.
 2. N. Rosenthal, *Winter Blues: Seasonal Affective Disorder:What It Is and How to Overcome It* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998).

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