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A State of SADness

Living in Nebraska, the terms “seasonal funk” and “winter blues” are common this time of year. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is more than a funk. SAD is a real, genuine type of depression that can sap energy and create moodiness during the cold winter months.

Symptoms of SAD can include irritability, feeling sluggish, having problems sleeping, weight gain, appetite changes, and general anxiety or depression.

Women are more likely to experience this issue, but it can happen to anyone. With age, the lens of a human eye begins to yellow and the pupil narrows, potentially limiting sufficient absorption of the high energy visible (HEV) light or blue light. That light is needed to keep a body regulated by its internal clock, or circadian rhythm.

"The short wave length of blue light that reaches our retina plays a part in ensuring our psychological well-being," stated Nebraska Optometrist Dr. Dirk Gray. Also, less and less time seems to be spent outside, with the conveniences of modern-day technology. The problem with that is artificial indoor lights are up to 10,000 times dimmer than real sunlight, and are usually lacking in the complete light spectrum a body needs. This disturbs the cycle of crucial bright light needed to keep those internal clocks ticking.

A drop in sunlight exposure also means a drop in serotonin levels, a brain chemical that affects mood. The body's level of melatonin, a hormone that regulates sleep patterns, is also affected by changes in seasons. Dr. Gray explains, "This is partly due to the light energy required for a melatonin-regulated process in which light is largely absorbed through the eye. During the winter months, the light required for this process is limited."

We don't consider it often enough, but when sleep is disrupted, it negatively affects everything else in life. Every step should be taken for all members of the family to get the best sleep possible, like keeping a regular bedtime and waking schedule and getting bright sunlight as early as possible in the day. That full spectrum light we want to avoid at night is exactly what our bodies need, in small doses, during the day. When the sun sets, it is best to lower lights inside and later sleep in total darkness with no devices lighting up or dinging in the middle of the night to disturb sleep.

Other fixes may be as easy as taking vitamin D3 to replace that missing sunlight, or using a special bright light, called a phototherapy light, on days when the sun hides behind clouds. However, according to the National Institute of Health, nearly half the people with SAD do not respond to light therapy alone. It is best to talk with a professional about what is best for you.

As with other types of depression, symptoms of SAD should be taken seriously and can get worse, if not treated. Making an appointment with a physician or psychologist for these symptoms does not label a person as weak. It is simply seeking an answer to the temporary

“Nebraska winter blues” which truly messes with a person’s mind and body. The good news is that cold-weather SAD symptoms do go away in the summer, but why suffer half the year? A family doctor or mental health specialist can help guide you through this problem. Visit mayoclinic.org for a list of things to consider and write down before an appointment.

To learn more about Seasonal Affective Disorder, visit medlineplus.gov or mayoclinic.org.