Beat the Winter Blues: Seasonal Affective Disorder

Many people experience what we call the winter blues. This is fairly normal for people to get sad or bored with the dreary weather. However, for some people sad and blue feelings are much more intense and severely impact one’s functioning, behavior and mood. Some of these individuals may be experiencing **SAD or Seasonal Affective Disorder**: a type of winter depression that affects people each year between September and April.

**SAD** should be diagnosed by a trained professional. Symptoms include:

- Disturbed sleep: early morning wakening, desire to oversleep, difficulty staying awake
- Increased weight gain. Craving carbohydrates and sweets
- Depression (hopelessness, despair, misery, apathy) that occurs regularly during fall or winter months, but in remission in spring and summer
- Irritability, mood swings
- Avoiding social contact
- Tension and low stress tolerance
- Loss of libido
- Tired, lethargic, fatigue
- Loss of pleasure or interest in most all activities
- Leaden paralysis: heavy, leaden feeling in arms or legs

**What causes SAD?**

Research has associated SAD with seasonal variations of light and secretion of the sleep related hormone melatonin. It is produced at increased levels in the dark. Therefore, when we have more darkness in the winter, more of this hormone is produced. Other research also indicates that the serotonin levels may be affected which may be a cause for depression.

**Treatment for People with SAD:**
First, an individual should be diagnosed by a trained mental health professional or physician. Treatment ranges from counseling, to medication and/or light therapy. Don’t be afraid to seek help. This problem can be treated effectively.

**How to Get Through the Winter Blues:**
- Get exercise on a regular basis.
- Create some structure. Join a club, socialize and engage in hobbies.
- Use brighter lamps and turn more lights on during the winter months.
- Take walks at lunch or during daylight to get some exposure to natural light.
- Restructure your workspace: put your desk by a window, open shades, add a lamp or two.
- See a counselor or physician if your symptoms are severe or impact your functioning and get help. Contact your EAP: 607-273-7494 or 800-834-1239