

Live Well to
Learn Well

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Though Cornell boasts state-of-the-art facilities, great faculty, and numerous opportunities for students to find instruction in any subject, it also has some of the dreariest weather in the northeast. With long, cloudy winters around the Ithaca area, many students, staff, and faculty suffer from the blues, a mild depression brought on by a decrease in exposure to sunlight as autumn deepens. This fact sheet is intended to provide you with information concerning the symptoms and effective methods on how to treat the winter blues.

What it is

Those suffering from the winter blues fall into a depressed mood each year in the fall and continue to feel depressed throughout the winter and into the early spring, when these feelings disappear. The winter blues and its more severe counterpart, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), affects about four times as many women as men. Nearly 25% of all college students across the United States suffer from the winter blues and this percentage increases at higher latitudes or more cloudy areas, such as the Ithaca region.

The winter blues are primarily caused by unstable melatonin levels, a hormone produced during sleep, and serotonin, a neurotransmitter responsible for mood, hunger, and sleep. As the days become shorter and the hours of sunlight decrease, sufferers of the winter blues experience changes in their mood, energy level, and ability to concentrate. Although the winter blues are not as severe as long-term depression, they can change the way a person thinks, reacts, and deals with everyday challenges.

Signs & symptoms

If you experience two or more of these symptoms each year in the fall and into the spring you may suffer from the winter blues:

- Increased feelings of lethargy
- Difficulty waking up in the mornings as the days get shorter
- Difficulty concentrating and thinking creatively in comparison to the summer months
- Incorrectly blaming oneself for things that go wrong
- Difficulty performing tasks that normally seem to be easy/enjoyable
- Increased craving for carbohydrate-rich food like chocolate and sodas



Even small self-care strategies can make a difference.

You're likely to be challenged by grey days for much of your time at Cornell, but the good news is that more than 85% of people with the winter blues can overcome these symptoms with various forms of therapy.

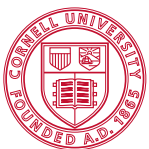
Consider these strategies

Exercise and its benefits

Aerobic exercise has proven to help college students combat feeling of the blues in the winter. Not only does aerobic exercise improve mood, but it also has been shown to reduce stress, which often exacerbates feelings of depression brought on by the winter blues. Studies have shown that one hour aerobic exercise outside (even with a cloudy skies overhead) has the same benefits as 2.5 hours of light treatment indoors. Aerobic exercise rids winter blues sufferers from feelings of depression because it increases serotonin levels. Briskly walking to classes, taking a run, skiing, sledding and having a snowball fight have all been proven to help suffers of the blues feel better.

Nutrition: what to eat and why

Many people who suffer from the winter blues crave junk food and soft drinks as the days get shorter. The reason they want to indulge in high-sugar foods is because carbohydrates are often effective in increasing serotonin levels in the brain. A better strategy for anyone with the winter blues would be to eat larger portions of complex carbohydrates, like pasta and rice, and healthy simple carbohydrates like fruits and fruit juices during meals, and stay away from unhealthy snacks that will cause momentary relief, but ultimately decrease energy.



Sleep strategies

Because many college students tend to go to sleep late and wake up late, those suffering from the winter blues are often asleep when the morning sun is up and shining. This sleep-wake schedule limits the number of hours that those with the winter blues are exposed to sunlight. Winter blues sufferers should make an effort to expose themselves to sunlight in the early morning. Take a walk outside or lift the curtain in your room as soon as you rise. Also, try to limit sleep to 8-hour periods on a regular schedule. Oversleeping and fluctuation in sleep-wake schedule causes increases in levels of melatonin during sleep, which can contribute to feelings of depression. Set a regular bedtime and wake up at the same time each day. This will give you more energy during the day and reduce feelings of depression.

Light Boxes

Multiple studies have found that the majority of those suffering from the winter blues experience relief solely from the regular use of “light boxes.” Light boxes emit high intensities of light of 2,500 to 10,000 lux (as compared to a normal light fixture that emits 250 to 500 lux) and produce similar effects to the sun’s natural rays. The high intensities of light improve the mood of those suffering from the winter blues because they restrict the secretion of melatonin in the brain. Light boxes are best used daily and in the early morning for periods of 30 minutes to two hours. Depending on the severity of the winter blues case, most people find their symptoms are gone after just 2 weeks of use.

Light boxes may be covered by your insurance plan if you get a prescription, so be sure to contact your plan provider. You can purchase light boxes in the pharmacy at Cornell Health or from several companies online.

Note: if your insurance doesn’t cover light boxes, consider simply purchasing full-spectrum light bulbs for your bedroom and work spaces.

Medication

Some people who suffer from more severe cases of the winter blues might find that antidepressant medicine, in conjunction with other forms of therapy, assist mood. Drugs like Paxil, Prozac, and Zoloft, which increase levels of serotonin by blocking re-uptake sites in the brain, have proven effective with some patients. There is evidence that suggests that the over-the-counter medication St. John’s wort may also be effective in relieving symptoms. If considering any medication, it should be noted that these are just recommendations and those interested in the possible benefits of antidepressants should first speak with a professional counselor.

Talk with us

If your attempts at self-care aren’t working, reach out for support. Your Primary Care Provider (PCP) at Cornell Health can review your symptoms and make recommendations for support. They can also assist you with referrals to specialists and with prescriptions (e.g., for medication or other pharmacy supplies) as needed. Appointments with your PCP can be made online at myCornellHealth or by phone at 607-255-5155.

Additional resources

- American Psychological Association: apa.org/helpcenter/seasonal-affective-disorder
- National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): newsinhealth.nih.gov/2013/01/beat-winter-blues

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