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a resource in:

Mental Health

Understanding Seasonal Depression



APOSTOLIC CHRISTIAN

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Understanding Seasonal Depression

Psalm 42:5, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance."

Our life on earth is full of ups and downs, joys and sorrows. Sometimes, because of any number of factors, we may find ourselves struggling with depression. Sometimes it creeps up stealthily and pulls us down slowly so that we don't realize it until we've sunk quite deep. Sometimes it hits us unexpectedly and in full force.

It is key to understand that "being a Christian" and "being depressed" are not mutually exclusive. The belief that "good Christians don't get depressed" can lead to unnecessary feelings of guilt, shame, and confusion when people experience one of the many forms of depression. Even as believers, we are human beings with human bodies and minds. David and Elijah of the Bible both provide us with two examples of God's people who likely struggled with symptoms of depression.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (S.A.D.), also called the "Wintertime Blues": As we are in the midst of the winter months, some of us may be experiencing a very common and treatable type of depression. Studies have shown that up to 50% of the population experience a change in mood during the wintertime. For some of these people, the change in seasons during the winter months (from Fall to Spring) is directly related to the onset of clinical depression. In addition, for people already struggling with depression, depressive symptoms may get worse during the winter months. Some of the common complaints of depression and the wintertime blues include:

- Depression and anxiety: despair, guilt, hopelessness, restlessness.
- Sleep problems: oversleeping, difficulty getting out of bed, needing to nap often.
- Overeating: carbohydrate craving that can lead to weight gain.
- Interpersonal problems: irritability, avoiding social situations.
- Difficulty concentrating: more forgetful, 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.

The Importance of Light

The decrease in the amount of sunlight is a major factor for the wintertime blues. Other factors such as decreased activity level, holiday stress, and changes in our regular routine may also contribute to the problem. The best and most reliable treatment for S.A.D. is to get more exposure to sunlight. Morning sunlight is especially beneficial. Research has shown that therapeutic light boxes are also very helpful for S.A.D. Therapeutic light is considered to be about 10,000 lux for 15 to 30 minutes (lux is a measure of light intensity). Light boxes with 10,000 lux are available through retailers such as Amazon.com for around \$50. In addition, open your window shades to let in as much natural light as possible, especially in the morning.

Interventions to Help Ward off the Wintertime Blues

Spiritual: Maintaining a personal and intimate relationship with Christ is very important. However, sometimes when we most need to be connected with Christ and with a body of believers, we have the most difficulty doing it. We need to make efforts to immerse ourselves in a Christ-centered environment. We can post encouraging Bible verses on our refrigerators, car dashboards, bathroom mirrors, or other places we pass by often. We can take time to memorize Scripture verses which can help us during times we feel blue or are facing temptation. Finally, we can push ourselves to get out of the house and to church to help us to be fed by hearing the Word of God and interacting with others.

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Relational: God created us in His image as relational beings. His desire to have a personal relationship with us underscores how important relationships are to God. Overcoming isolation is another key factor in dealing with the wintertime blues and depression in general. Overcoming isolation involves being around people with whom we can open up, relate, and share. We need to look for opportunities that will allow us to encourage others and be encouraged by others.

Biological: When striving to ward off the wintertime blues, we must not forget to take care of our bodies. We honor our body because it is the temple of God (1 *Corinthians 3:16*, “*Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?*”). Even though it can be especially difficult in the winter months, getting regular exercise, rest, and proper nutrition is very important. Setting aside time from our busy schedules to exercise regularly not only will help us to feel better physically, but it can also help to improve mood and energy levels.

The change in the length of days during the winter can throw off our sleep/wake cycle. Many people are more sedentary during the winter which leads to increased feelings of fatigue. Keeping a daily routine, getting up at regular times, and having activities planned for our days can help ward off many of the negative effects of the shorter winter days.

Emotional: *Proverbs 23:7* declares, “*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. We can choose to focus on “depressive thoughts” or “coping thoughts.” A depressive thought could be something like, “I’m feeling lonely. I hate this. I have three more long months of winter to go. I’ll never make it.” The hopelessness in that statement is very apparent. It contrasts with Jesus’ statement in *John 10:10*: “*I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.*” Jesus’ plan for us is hopefulness, not hopelessness. A modification of the above depressive thought could 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, text a friend to get together, or visit someone.” Coping thoughts such as this one deal with reality and acknowledge how we feel about a situation; however, these coping thoughts don’t leave us stranded and powerless but offer a way forward and hope.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (S.A.D.) is a common and treatable problem. Please reach out for support if you are feeling depressed. You don’t have to go through it alone. Contact ACCFS for additional information.