

What to Do When Your Child Has the “Winter Blues”



By Emma Martin LaPlant, MA, LAMFT

Lots of people experience the “winter blues,” which is a general term to define mild increases in stress or sadness during the shorter days of the winter months. This stress is usually linked to something specific, such as lots of activities to juggle, difficult family interactions around the holidays, and extra reminders about loved ones who have passed, among other things.

Something more serious, now called Major Depressive Disorder with seasonal pattern (previously known as Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD), is a diagnosable mental illness when this seasonal sadness follows a persistent pattern that disrupts daily functioning. This condition is not tied to stressors and typically follows an ongoing pattern each winter.

Prevalence of this condition is increased among people living in northern latitude -- i.e., here in Minnesota. It's also more common in young people, and women are more likely to experience it than men. Furthermore, mood disorders, including this one, are more likely if someone in your family has been diagnosed.

Warning Signs of Major Depressive Disorder with Seasonal Pattern:

- Having low energy more days than not.
- Hypersomnia, meaning excessive sleepiness.
- Overeating and craving carbohydrates.
- Gaining weight.
- Feeling like "hibernating."
- Losing interest in activities previously enjoyed, like hobbies or spending time with friends.
- Feeling hopeless, worthless, and/or irritable.

What Can You Do to Help it at Home?

There are several things you can do to alleviate the symptoms in your child or yourself. Getting outside for some fresh air or social fun is a great start. Go for a walk, to a movie, ice skating, sledding, or participating in other activities and hobbies you enjoy. Because Major Depressive Disorder with seasonal pattern is largely caused by a lack of sunlight, get out in the sun as much as possible. If the weather is consistently cloudy, try using a sun lamp or "happy lamp" for light therapy -- a special lamp that mimics the sun's rays. Make an effort to spend time with others, and confide in a close friend or family member about how you're feeling. Fill your body with healthy things as well: eat nutritious foods, and avoid overloading on carbs like cookies and candy. And of course, get help when needed -- talk to your doctor, therapist, school personnel, or family member if you or your child are struggling.

What Professional Help Is Available?

If you find your child or yourself continuing to be affected by Major Depressive Disorder with seasonal pattern and feel that professional help might be needed, there are some things a therapist can do to help. Talk therapy can be helpful in identifying the underlying cause of the symptoms, as well as provide

a plan for coping and increasing resilience. Vitamin D supplements may be recommended as a replacement for missing the sun's vitamin D, and mood regulating medications may be prescribed.

Winter may feel like it drags on, but it is possible to get your child -- or yourself -- feeling happy and active enough to enjoy what the season has to offer. Reach out to your community for support, or [contact Headway](#) for a free 20-minute counseling session to get started.

Emma Martin is a Headway therapist based in Burnsville-Eagan-Savage School District 191. She joined Headway in August 2016 and has worked in the human services field since 2011. Emma has previous experience working with children, adolescents, and their families in multiple different education venues, including The Annica Program, the Minnesota Autism Center and the Anova Center for Education. As a school-based therapist, she collaborates with families and school administration to provide a supportive and nurturing environment for her clients to learn, heal, and grow.