

## December 2014: Kick the Winter Blues

The days grow shorter and the nights seem never-ending; the winds howl and the temperature drops. Yes, it is winter again in Minnesota, often leaving people of all ages feeling sluggish, out-of-sorts, unmotivated and dreaming of sun-kissed beaches. The symptoms are not uncommon for those who live away from the equator—some 10-20% report feeling somewhat depressed during winter months if they live in extreme northern climates compared to only 1% in sunnier, warmer climates.

Studies show decreased sunlight can disrupt the body's internal clock, decrease production of both brain chemicals such as serotonin, which influences feelings of well-being, and hormones such as melatonin which impacts sleep and wake cycles. The result? That "winter will last forever and I don't want to do anything" feeling. But there are steps you can take that can help make winter seem shorter and keep your mood—and your family's—on the positive side.

**Lighten Up** Make your environment brighter—open blinds and curtains. Sit by a window or skylight. Use artificial light to mimic more hours of sunlight (try putting a timer on a light to turn on about 15-30 minutes prior to your alarm). Limit dark clothes—wear bold, bright colors on days spirits need a lift.

**Stay Active** Exercise relieves stress and builds up those feel-good endorphins. Ideally embrace outdoor winter sports or take an outdoor stroll, but even indoor exercise such as walking on a treadmill or group activities such as basketball or a dance class have distinct benefits. Strive for a minimum of 150 minutes of moderately intense exercise each week. Outdoor recess for younger children carries a double bonus—exercise and daylight!

**Eat Healthy** Your brain may think it needs high fat, high carb comfort food in winter, but those food choices leave you feeling more sluggish in the long run. Emphasize whole grains, fruits and vegetables and plenty of water (at least 2 liters daily for adults) in your diet. Let the comfort food be the exceptional treat, not the routine. Breakfast, while always important, is even more crucial to jump start mornings in the winter darkness.

**Be Adventurousome** Try a new hobby or activity or work on a new skill. Volunteer in the community or do something helpful for a friend or neighbor. Put on music and dance like no one is watching. Plan a family outing to a local venue such as a museum, zoo, conservatory or theater. Schedule a family/friend game night. Queue up comedies as laughter is the best medicine for the winter blues.

**Take Care of Yourself** Keep a consistent schedule, striving for 7-8 hours of sleep each night, more as indicated for children and adolescents. Make time to relax and treat yourself to something you enjoy. Consider incorporating yoga, imagery, massage therapy and/or meditation into your routine. Don't hibernate—be social, even if it's just over a cup of coffee or a phone chat.

With a little focus and planning, you can kick the winter blues, not just surviving winter but actually thriving!