



Your Family Feeling S.A.D.? It May be Seasonal Affective Disorder

National Children's Charity KidsPeace Gives Tips to "Lighten" Spirits in The Dark Times (of Winter)

BETHLEHEM, PENN. – For most of us – especially kids – winter is a lovely time, full of seasonal thrills (such as skating, sledding and snow days), as well as chills. But for millions of others each year the brightness and twinkle of a snowy morning is not enough to keep them from drifting into inactivity, lethargy – even dark thoughts.

It's no wonder. Winter is the darkest time of year and doctors know a lack of light can affect your mood. Every year, millions of people develop symptoms of the "winter blues" or Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). Symptoms include losing interest in activities, loss of energy, withdrawal from friends or work, and eating high-carb, high-fat "comfort food" with resulting weight gain. This helps to perpetuate a vicious cycle, with the weight gain adding to passivity, watching TV to excess, and lethargy.

"SAD is more common in young people and women," says Dr. Herbert Mandell, medical director for the 125-year-old national children's charity KidsPeace and the KidsPeace Children's Hospital. "And not surprisingly, it increases the further north you get from the equator."

SAD doesn't have to progress to a full-fledged clinical depression in order to be a genuine concern and there are things that can be done to help. Doctors can help people by exposing them to very bright lights (phototherapy) or using antidepressants, but there are some practical things all of us can do to help prevent or limit the effects of SAD. The mainstays are diet, exercise and outdoor activity. Here are some tips from KidsPeace's Dr. Mandell and the clinical experts at KidsPeace:

- Generally, the darker the day, the more important it is for you to get outside. Make sure you and your children are dressed comfortably and appropriately!
- Remember to shovel snow or do yard work at a steady pace, respecting your body's need for rest. Consult your physician if you have any medical concerns.
- Everyone in the family can play a role in cleanup after a winter storm. Make it a group project and be sure the kids are coming in periodically to warm up and drink something warm.
- Hot chocolate and coffee are favorites, but herbal tea can be just the ticket for some. The caffeine in coffee and chocolate may serve not only as a mild stimulant, but may temporarily act as a counter for carb-hunger.

- If you work in an office with few windows, use part of your break or lunch hour to get outside and walk briskly as much as possible in the sun. You will return to work energized, alert and less focused on food!
- Follow the same advice at home with your family. Get out during any break in the weather, and explore your neighborhood or a nearby park.
- You should not deny yourself your favorite foods and treats, but indulge in moderation. Try to think of desserts and snacks as goals you can earn with activity.
- If you have older kids or teens and they seem unusually “down,” talk, refer them to a safe, confidential website like www.TeenCentral.net where they can find help and encouragement, or seek outside help. Adults can go to www.kidspeace.org for tips on S.A.D. or other family problems.
- During storms and times when it is too windy, icy or cold to go out, try to spend an hour a day exercising in your home. You don’t need fancy equipment -- you can use canned goods from your kitchen as weights, follow aerobic tapes on your TV, or walk up and down your stairs! Almost any activity will help to counter a sense of “cabin fever”.
- Shopping at indoor malls is better than sitting at home, but no substitute for genuine outdoor activity.
- Finally, try to get out after dark for a stroll with someone you love. Snow adds more than a little charm.

“It’s usually the first step off the couch, away from the TV, and out the door that is the hardest,” says Dr. Lorrie Henderson, child and family expert who serves as Chief Operating Officer for KidsPeace. “Force yourself to make the effort – you and your family will be pleased with the results!”

KidsPeace is a 125-year-old national children’s crisis charity dedicated to giving hope, help, and healing to children facing crisis. Based in Bethlehem, PA with more than 50 centers nationwide, KidsPeace directly helps thousands of children a day to overcome the crises of growing up. Supported by VIP leaders including its national spokesperson Leeza Gibbons, Harvard’s famed Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Brown University’s Dr. Lewis Lipsitt, and child safety and self-esteem icon RETRO BILL, KidsPeace helps millions more each year through prevention and awareness programs. KidsPeace was named “The Outstanding Organization” of its kind in the country by the American Association of Psychiatric Services for Children and was called “a prototype of what we need for all children everywhere” by the late, nationally renowned child and family expert, Dr. Lee Salk.

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Contact: Mark Stubis 800-25-PEACE
mstubis@kidspeace.org