

Stuck in the doldrums?

If you are feeling sluggish or depressed lately, there may be a good reason. You may be experiencing the winter doldrums.

The term “doldrums” was the name given to a low-pressure belt around the Earth near the equator where sailing ships were often trapped on windless waters. Stranded sailors would grow frustrated and deeply depressed. Today, the dictionary calls the doldrums a period of stagnation or a slump.

In the dead of the winter, many people experience their own personal doldrums, with the wind taken out of their sails. Some call it winter depression, melancholia, being down in the dumps or having the blues. Psychologists and health professionals have another term: Seasonal Affective Disorder, or S.A.D. for short.

Although S.A.D. can occur in the summer too, it is most common from the late fall to winter months. It is about four times more likely to occur in women. It is also more common for people with a family history of S.A.D.

Generally, S.A.D. is related to changes in your body chemistry, specifically your serotonin and melatonin levels. Lack of light is deemed to be a big factor, but there are other factors that can contribute: The days are short; the nights are long. Cold, wintry weather leads to people spending more time indoors. This “hibernating” instinct can turn us into couch potatoes, with low activity levels, fewer social interactions and greater social isolation.

People who suffer from S.A.D. describe feeling listless, anxious and irritable. They often experience low energy levels, sleep disorders, headaches, weight gain, and other symptoms. The good news is that with treatment, Seasonal Affective Disorder can be managed.



Here are steps you can take to put wind back in your sails and navigate away from the winter doldrums:

Lighten up. The Mayo Clinic suggests a sunnier and brighter environment. Open blinds, trim tree branches blocking sunlight or add skylights to your home or office. If you can't do that, add more artificial light. Light therapy boxes have helped many lessen the negative effects of Seasonal Affective Disorder.

Get outside. Exercising and eating right can have a positive impact on your body's chemistry. Long walks in beautiful places can bring a sense of inner calm. Activity is a good antidote and nature has a restorative power to heal. Better yet, get social. Go walking, skiing or skating with friends to combine social interaction with exercise. Spending more time with friends can also lighten your mood.

Boost your vitamin D intake. Outside activities in daylight help because we absorb much of our Vitamin D from sun. But you can also get it in your food and you can ask your doctor to check your vitamin D level to see if you need a supplement.

Reach out for help. If your symptoms persist, talk to a physician or a therapist to explore the cause of your feelings of depression and what alternate treatments are available. Remember, you can call to speak to your EAP counselor day or night!