

# The Winter Blues: A Guide for Students



REFERENCES

## INTRODUCTION

Winter in Canada can bring many changes to the quality of our daily experience. The days get shorter and greyer. The weather is colder, and it may lead us to spend more time indoors. International students who have not experienced winter may find this time especially challenging to their mental wellness. Symptoms such as low energy, irritability, and low mood can arise.

A common term for this experience is the “winter blues” – a period of general discomfort characterized by the symptoms mentioned above. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) shares the same symptoms, but they are more severe and persistent, and can affect our ability to function in day-to-day life.

## DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN WINTER BLUES AND SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER AND THE POPULATION IT AFFECTS

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), or Depression with Seasonal Patterns, is a condition that depends on seasonal changes, appearing mostly in the fall and fading away in the spring/summer. Compared to Winter Blues, SAD consists of more severe symptoms including oversleeping, social withdrawal, and weight gain that persists over 2 weeks.

Approximately 2-3% of Canadians will experience SAD in their lifetime. Another 15% will experience the milder form, winter blues, which leaves them with mild symptoms of depression but still able to live their life without major disruptions. It is believed that people with SAD make up approximately 10% of all depression cases. Adults between 18-50 years of age, women, individuals living in northern regions and people with a history of depression are more likely to experience SAD .

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF SAD?

Symptoms of SAD are similar to the symptoms of depression. You may notice increased levels of irritability and find yourself more sensitive and reactive in your relationships. It is common to experience increased amounts of distraction, sadness, and guilt. Many people report low energy levels and feel tired, heavy, and lethargic. It is common to over-sleep during this time as your regular sleep schedule no longer provides adequate rest. Changes in weight as well as loss of interest in activities can occur as well.



# HELPFUL STEPS TO PREVENT AND MANAGE SAD OR WINTER BLUES

## LIFESTYLE CONSIDERATIONS

**INCREASING EXPOSURE TO NATURAL LIGHT** – Many of the practices designed to prevent or mitigate the winter blues/SAD aim to increase the amount of light we are exposed to during the winter months. Trying to increase outdoor activity or rituals during the daytime in the winter can be helpful and can also help us fall asleep better at night. If possible, avoid basement rental units as they limit the amount of light within your living space. If you do live in a basement unit, try to spend time outside or by a window as much as possible.

Artificial light therapy can be an effective method for improving symptoms. This involves sitting in front of a special UV lamp for approximately 30 minutes daily. It is important to consult with a healthcare professional when deciding on a schedule or when purchasing your own light. Check if your school library has a lending program for light therapy lamps.

## BUILDING MORE PHYSICAL WELLNESS INTO YOUR LIFESTYLE

Relieve stress, build energy, and improve mental well-being by increasing your physical activity, ideally before the winter blues or SAD symptoms take hold. Sometimes extra “comfort food” or increased sleep cravings can occur during winter blues or SAD. You can consult an on-campus dietitian or a medical professional on how to navigate a balance within your dietary needs and sleep routine.

## MAINTAINING SOCIAL INTERACTION WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY

Being in touch with friends and family, both in person and electronically, can provide valuable social opportunities to refresh your mood. It can combat feelings of loneliness, isolation, and guilt. Joining campus clubs and meeting new friends through campus activities is also encouraged.

## SEEKING SUPPORT

While it may feel scary at first, reaching out for professional support can be helpful if you are finding daily tasks to be challenging due to Winter Blues or SAD symptoms. Mental health professionals can help identify feelings or experiences that are influencing your symptoms, or if you need additional support like medications. There are a number of ways you can access services:

1. Find out what services are available through your post-secondary counselling department or student wellness services. Many schools even have support programs specifically geared toward international students!
2. **Good2Talk** is a free resource for post-secondary students. Trained professionals are available for support through a helpline or text.
3. **Connex Ontario** provides information on treatment services as well as confidential support across Ontario.

Keep in mind, the help you seek will stay confidential unless there is an immediate risk of harm. If seeking support by yourself is daunting, asking a trusted friend to be there when you're calling a helpline or scheduling an appointment can help. It can also be hard if you're struggling with stigma, have a fear of being stigmatized, or you are not used to seeking mental health support. Educating yourself on mental health, showing yourself-compassion, talking to people who are open about their own mental health, and advocating for yourself are some steps to reduce the stigma.



Research has found benefits from exposure to sunlight within one hour of waking up in the morning, particularly for people with SAD.