

Caregiver's Corner Column (January 2014)

Let's Not Just Beat the Winter Blues, Let's Crush 'Em!

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The technical name is “Seasonal Affective Disorder”, or SAD, for the winter blues. My natural instinct is to hibernate, not just because I'm fat and hairy, I just really don't like winter anymore. I'd rather crawl under the covers, peak my head out on Ground Hog Day, to see how much longer until I can come out.

The experts say it's a clinical diagnosis that's related to the shortening of daylight hours, and can make people feel depressed. As a family caregiver, the last thing that we need is another thing causing us to feel depressed during the long winter months.

Fortunately there are many things we can do, but first let's make up our minds we're going to beat this thing, we're going to crush it. Play your favorite college fight song or the Star Spangled Banner right now before reading any further. Do whatever you like, but get psyched up.

Scientists pioneered the use of light therapy, which has become standard treatment for SAD. When the sun does shine in the winter you need to get outdoors and enjoy it. When you are in your home, keep your lights on. Better yet, buy a light therapy lamp or light box, and sit in front of it for 30 minutes a day.

Now, don't tell me you don't have 30 minutes a day. How much time do you spend watching TV every day? Turn the lamp on while you're watching TV. Remember, we've made up our minds to beat this.

Exercise. Wipe the frown off your face and listen up. When you exercise your muscles get stronger and your heart pumps blood more efficiently and your aerobic capacity increases. It helps a lot of other things work better and enables you to avoid some dreadful diseases too. It also improves our mood, fights depression and makes us smarter. Add in a nutritious diet, and you'll be stopped by your friends on the street in the spring about how marvelous you look. Exercise changes your fundamental physiology and psychology for a much better you. You need to exercise 5 to 6 days a week. But, start where you are and work your way up, even if you can barely walk for 10 minutes, do 10 minutes a day, until you can do a brisk walk for 45 to 60 minutes. Add a little strength training 2 or 3 days a week and keep at it. We're going to beat these blues into submission.

As a motivator you might want to set a goal like a 5K or 10K walk or run in the spring.

Now we're changing the whole outlook of this winter from SAD you too BAD you, bad meaning “great” in this context, the baddest you yet.

Eating healthier foods. Is it a coincidence that the current Standard American Diet abbreviates to SAD? You know you need to eat better, so why not start now. Eat more fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes, beans, lean meats if you must, fish, and decrease the amounts of refined, processed foods, sugar, high fructose corn syrup and bad fats. By changing the way we eat, we can address, and lower our chances of getting several chronic and acute diseases.

Now, not only did you crush the winter time blues, you came out in the spring looking like Superman or Wonder-Woman. I can see you on your front porch, arms akimbo melting the last remnants of snow with your x-ray vision.

Other things to do; go to a movie, have lunch with a friend, go ice-skating, and meditate. Take a class, start a new hobby, volunteer; don't just sit around the house. Go to bed early and wake up early so you're awake during all the daylight hours. Laughter is good medicine too.

There you have it. See you in the spring.

Caregiver's Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title IIIIE, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.