

BenefitFacts

Dealing with Winter Depression

When grey skies and blah weather keep people indoors, about 15% of Canadians get the “winter blues,” while 2-3% of people in Canada experience seasonal affective disorder (SAD), according to Canadian Mental Health Association.

Lack of sunlight is commonly identified as a cause of seasonal depression, as this can upset a person’s circadian rhythm that regulates their mood and sleep patterns. Per Canadian Psychological Association, lack of exposure to sunlight can affect serotonin and melatonin levels, which influences mood and sleep. Mood changes are also linked to people being cooped up inside and deprived of their regular outdoor activities.

Faced with dark, cold days, some people want to sleep more, eat comfort foods with carbs and fats, avoid hobbies and activities they previously enjoyed, and isolate themselves from friends and family. Fortunately, Chambers Plan members who need a little help shaking these “winter blues” can access myStrength, a digital program from Teladoc® available via app or online 24 hours a day to support mental health needs, including mild depression. Chambers Plan also includes Huger, a mental wellness app designed to help deepen social connections, track feelings, and alleviate isolation and loneliness.

On the other hand, people with SAD have the signs and symptoms of depression, with a major one being a feeling of despair that lasts for most of the day, over a period

longer than two weeks. It can hinder a person at work, school or in relationships. When diagnosed by a doctor or mental health professional, treatment for SAD may require cognitive behavioural therapy, counselling, medication or light therapy, meaning exposure to bright artificial light (SAD lamps are sold for home use).

Chambers Plan’s Extended Health options include Mental Health Navigator by Teladoc to help find a mental healthcare professional. Most Plan options also provide coverage for sessions with psychologists, registered clinical counsellors and other professionals. If available to them, people can also access an Employee Assistance Program (an optional benefit under Chambers Plan), which provides confidential support to employees and their dependents.

Research finds exposure to sunlight within one hour from waking up in the morning to be helpful. People should open their blinds at home, sit beside a window, and definitely should try to get outside for a walk. Of course, exercise is always a positive tool to benefit mental health and raise energy levels. It’s also helpful to follow a regular sleep pattern, eat healthily, and ensure people have enough vitamin D in their diet.

Like any other serious illness that impacts peoples’ lives at work and off the job, asking for help, even when a person just doesn’t feel like themselves, can be the first step toward getting back on track.