

LOSING DAYLIGHT

Avoiding the seasonal blues as Alaska falls into the dark days of winter.

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The fall equinox was Tuesday, temperatures are dropping and the hours of Alaskan daylight are slipping away. It kind of makes you want to cozy up next to a fire with hot cocoa and a favorite book.

The lack of daylight in Alaskan winters makes you want to slow down and Suzanne Womack Strisik, associate professor of psychology and director of the Psychological Services Center at University of Alaska Anchorage, says it's OK.

"You don't have to keep up with the pace you're at during the summer," Strisik said. "It's congruent with the Alaskan culture to slow down in the winter months."

There's a point where slowing down for the winter becomes more serious though. Seasonal affective

disorder, cleverly nicknamed SAD, affects 6 percent of Americans. Studies show a much higher rate of Alaskans fight SAD

symptoms compared with those who live in states with brighter winter days.

"We're more vulnerable than people in the Lower 48," Strisik said.



Suzanne Womack Strisik

WHAT IS SAD?

SAD is a biological disorder in which your body actually has a negative physiological reaction to a lack of sunlight. It throws your circadian rhythms off. Sunlight is essential to your body's ability to produce Vitamin D and create serotonin and other neurotransmitters that give people a sense of physical and emotional well-being.

Strisik said everyone is at risk of

SAD, but symptoms can range from just a couple of mild effects to intense depression.

Symptoms include feeling blue, increased appetite and carbohydrate cravings, overeating and weight gain, increased need for sleep, poor sleep quality, daytime drowsiness, lack of energy and decreased libido. Also, less widely known symptoms include anxiety, irritability, difficulty focusing at work and social discomfort.

“Things you usually enjoy lose their pleasure,” Strisik said. “If you normally like to go to the symphony or theater on a Saturday night, those things lose their appeal.”

Strisik said some of these symptoms are part of normal life cycles.

“It’s OK to do more inward focus activities in the winter – home activities and hobbies,” she said. “Allow yourself to slow down.”

Try to get outside and get the sunlight your body needs. You still need balance, Strisik emphasizes. Get out walking, even a 10-minute walk around the block each day will help you get the UV rays you need.

Ideally, she says, you should spend a half-hour exercising outside during daylight at least three to four times a week. She suggests taking up skiing, snowshoeing or another winter outdoor activity.

Light therapy is another option. Broad spectrum artificial lights, sometime called 'happy lights' allow skin to produce Vitamin D. Sitting in front of 10,000 lux of diffused, white florescent lights for 30 to 90 minutes a day can mimic the response the body has to natural sunlight. Full Spectrum Lighting in Anchorage sells broad-spectrum therapy lamps and light bulbs. More information can be found on the company's Web site, www.alaskafull spectrumlighting.com.

For another option, studies show a new

"What your body is really asking for is protein," Strisik said.

She recommends eating foods that are high in protein to fight those carb cravings and boost your energy levels. Nuts, cheese, meat, beans and certain grains such as quinoa, are good choices. (*Check out Page 19 for a recipe for Asparagus Quinoa Salad.*)

You can also boost your Vitamin D intake by taking a supplement or eating foods high in the vitamin that increases energy, controls appetite and improves mood.

Few foods, including fatty fish such as salmon and tuna as well as eggs, are naturally high in Vitamin D. However, milk and cereal are often fortified with Vitamin D – check the labels for it.

GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION

If you feel like you need nine hours or sleep in the winter instead of your regular eight, Strisik says go for it.

"Give yourself permission to rest," she said.

Take that afternoon nap. If your work schedule is flexible, sleep an extra hour in the morning a couple days a week.

Strisik encourages employers to acknowledge that Alaska's daylight swings mean people may have to shift their work schedules and adapt to a slower-paced winter.

"I want to start a revolution," she said. "It's actually very wise to slow down. Respect the process."

ARE SAD OR HAVE SAD?

Although studies show women and adults over 30 are more vulnerable to SAD, Strisik says it's not a black-and-white issue.

Whether a person has SAD symptoms is more on a sliding scale of how much a lack of daylight affects them.

If everyone is susceptible to some level of the winter blues, then how do you know whether you need extra help? Where's the line between taking afternoon naps and indulging in extra holiday goodies and needing additional help?

When it interferes with your functioning and when you're suffering more often than not, Strisik said.

"You might be tearful, reclusive or irritable," Strisik said. "Usually it's hard to pinpoint what's going on with you."

Strisik says lots of general physicians have done their research and are qualified to help diagnose and treat SAD, but nothing replaces a good psychiatrist or nurse practitioner who specializes in psychiatry.

A doctor might prescribe antidepressants such as Wellbutrin or Prozac which have been used to fight SAD symptoms. Strisik said studies show a drug called Valdoxin actually works to reverse disruption to circadian rhythms.

Visiting a psychotherapist can work on feelings of helplessness and low self worth. Strisik said if a person get the right therapist, he or she can help develop coping skills to deal with the emotional effects of SAD.

"If you're nervous about antidepressants, a therapist can recommend natural treatments and help you understand deeper issues you might be dealing with," Strisik said.

CAN SAD BE OVERCOME?

"Sure. You can sail right through it," Strisik said. "But getting to that place is not a one-step process." ■