

A Change in the Weather

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It's that time of year again where for most, vacations have come and gone, camping will or would have slowed somewhat, and the children have packed lunches and back packs for school. Yes...summer, where the days are brighter and nights are longer, the smells of BBQ and fire pits, the patio gatherings with jokes, stories, song and dance... will end. The days will seem shorter and the nights will seem darker, the smell of BBQ (although some BBQ year round) will be rare, and the patio furniture will be gathered and stored till the following year. Like it or not, there will be a change in the weather!

For some, a change in the weather during this time of year means a little more than cooler temperatures with a chance of frost, freezing rain, flurries or snow. It could mean experiencing a depressed mood during the day (even everyday), a real lack of interest or pleasure in most (or maybe all) activities of the day, losing weight or gaining it (more than usual of course) with appetite changes or issues, getting no sleep or sleeping too much, experiencing fatigue, feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt and even thoughts of self-harm. You may be thinking that "winter time is not very nice to some people", but I should point out that for others, these feelings and experiences take place in the spring and summer, not only the fall and winter.

The symptoms or issues noted in the above paragraph are that of depression. But as the article name implies, changes in the weather or specific times in the seasons, these symptoms are much more noticeable or severe. For a particular number in the population you can say that there are "seasonal patterns" to symptoms/experiences of depression. I'm sure many have heard of term "Seasonal Affective Disorder", or the abbreviated term "SAD". This term has been floating around for some time now to account for the seasonal changes in people's moods, feelings and/or experiences in overall happiness and life.

So, if you're someone who can attest that during particular months of the year or more generally during particular seasons who experience overall changes in yourself as a person and how you feel, and if you haven't already put some plans in place to help counteract the situation then perhaps now is the time to think about it and challenge yourself to take some control. I will not say that everything you do will bring you nothing but happiness and rid your challenges for good, however, there is a possibility of change and a change that may be useful and more importantly, make a difference in a positive way.

Here are a couple of things that might serve as a “jump start” for getting the ball rolling.

❖ Mr. Google...

Now as most know, Mr. Google has an abundance of information that he offers in a prompt fashion, but doing a quick search can be quite daunting when you get pages and pages of information and links. My advice to this is, click and explore the first few links and see what's there. What you find might be worth thinking about or may not be even close to what you're looking for. But when in the initial stages of change and empowerment, you do have to start somewhere. So, the act of doing a search and a little bit reading in itself is positive, even if it's not what you're looking for. The point here is actively engaging yourself.

❖ Getting Ready...

For some of us our mood changes are like clock –work. If you experience changes in yourself each year and can confidently say that when that time of year approaches and you will have challenges to deal with, then instead of waiting for the downtime to begin, start gearing yourself to counteract and manage the onset as best you can from the start. I can promise you are not the only person who notices changes in how you feel. There may be times when it can seem that way, but when you're feeling off, your friends and the people closest to you, know. This is not a bad thing. I can also confidently say that your friends and family will have an interest in helping you make a difference. So...gather a couple of your closest friends or family members and talk to them exactly about what happens. Allow them to be active partners and give them permission to assist in challenging and encouraging you to follow through with activities, commitments and taking care of yourself. Having a caring nudge on the shoulder can feel good once in a while.

❖ Maintaining you're Already Healthy Habits...

Of course it is a little easier (and for some a lot easier) to engage in healthy activities when we are feeling happy and full of life. It may be easier to maintain a healthier diet with exercise, engage in regular outdoor activities such as hiking or biking, keeping regular “hang out” times and activities with friends and family, or even maintain interest in a particular hobby. I personally have hobbies that are only accessible during the winter season, while others during the summer season. However, there are other hobbies that I can maintain all year round with a little tweaking and adjustment. This allows me to feel like I have access to what I want all year, and not be limited. For example, walking and taking nature pictures. In the spring and summer season the weather is a little more conducive to such an activity, but in the fall and winter season, snow shoes allow the chance to experience a different picturesque beauty like no other. You get to continue your hobby and get your exercise too which contributes to a better feeling you. Put yourself out there, and you may find it rewarding to work at maintaining that hobby all year round.

❖ Give Yourself Permission...

This may come across as an oxymoron, but there are actually times in life where you will not want to do anything, and just relax and “veg”. Even time when it doesn’t feel difficult to engage in activities and keep up with responsibilities we can forget to actually take some “me time” and to relax and charge the batteries. Well, even though this article is about setting yourself up and doing what you can to stay out of the “pit”, I will acknowledge that it can be hard work counteracting seasonal effects of depression or “the blues”. We do need to have some relaxation and “me time” even when we are challenging ourselves to be active, engaging, maintaining responsibilities, and so on. I believe that planning “downtime” to recharge the batteries is also healthy. It can feel stressful and draining counteracting the blues so knowing that you actually have downtime planned as a way to recharge from your hard work is allowed. So, give yourself permission, but remember the purpose of it so that it becomes a healthy part of what you’re doing.

❖ Follow up with Physician & Mental Health Clinician

No matter what you read or may have been advised by the internet, friends and family, you should maintain contact with your doctor. Over the years, more and more awareness has been brought to attention regarding the stigma associated with mental health and the troubles or circumstances that people may find themselves in. The “wall” may be lowering as times goes on, but many of us can feel embarrassed, ashamed and awkward. These feelings will add to your circumstances and make it more challenging to have some control in your life. Break the barrier and speak with your doctor or mental health professional for support and treatment options for helping yourself. For example, Light Therapy appears to be a common form of treatment that has some benefits and may be something to discuss with your physician.

The list above is not by any means an exhaustive list or a list of strategies that if used then everything will be cured! However, if your reaction to reading this is “yeah, there are a couple of things I can do here” or “let’s try something”, then that’s fine with me. People will often say that it’s your choice to feel the way you feel and well, in some circumstances, sure... but not all. However, it is your choice to work at making a difference for yourself. You may learn that certain strategies or ideas don’t work well, but you also may experience something that does. Giving yourself that chance or option is very important. Much like the “Changes in the Weather”, your feelings, moods, and experiences will change too. Sometimes it may mean “riding it out” or “dressing up and moving forward”.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2000). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed., text rev.). Washington, DC: Author.