

## **May Your Days Be Merry & Bright**

**Written By: Brooke Spencer, Health Educator, BS**

I'm sure you've all heard the song "White Christmas". It's a classic that always seems to get one into the holiday spirit. There is however one line in the song that's always stood out to me, "May your days be merry and bright". First off, these winter months are definitely not bright. On average we receive about 9 hours of sunlight per day compared to the average 12 hours during the summer months. For those of us who wake up and go to work in the dark and leave the office just as the sun is setting, it may seem as though the sun is non-existent during the winter.

During the holiday season, we find many days to be merry. However, once the holidays have passed and everyone has returned to their normal routines, it's harder to find those happy days. Why is that? It could just be a post-holiday slump, it could be a mild case of the winter blues, or in some cases it could be Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

The winter blues is a more general term rather than a medical diagnosis. It refers to a mood shift, lethargy, or change in appetite during the winter months. SAD on the other hand is a clinically defined diagnosis and those who have it experience more severe symptoms. Rather than feeling occasionally down, those with SAD follow a regular pattern of feeling hopeless, irritable, withdrawn, low on energy, and loss of interest in normal activities. So why does "the most wonderful time of the year" tend to bring a lack of holiday cheer?

According to [Harvard Health](#), the reduction of sunlight during the winter months disrupts the body's internal clock or circadian rhythm. Your body responds to cues in your surroundings, such as light and darkness. Melatonin and serotonin are both neurotransmitters that carry messages through the nervous system in response to light and darkness. When the days are shorter and darker more melatonin, which helps induce sleep, is produced. This causes one to feel sleepier throughout the day. On the other hand, serotonin which is triggered by light, elevates your mood, and contributes to satiety. With less of serotonin being produced during the winter months, you may find yourself feeling less cheerful and more hungry.

Below are a few tips you can use to help you feel better during this time of year:

**Limit your sugar intake-** sugar may give you a happy boost at first but [research from UCLA](#) suggests that too much sugar can functionally change your brain and slow it down. The crash after sugar high can easily make you feel worse than you did before.

**Flood your home with light-** open the shutters, pull back the drapes, and sit close to the windows if working from home to optimize sunlight exposure.

**Eat omega-3 fatty acids-** a [study from the University of Pittsburgh](#) found that people with higher levels of omega-3 fatty acids were less likely to experience moderate or mild symptoms of depression. Omega-3's can be found in flax seeds, walnuts, and salmon.

**Take a walk-** getting out in the daylight can help reset your internal clock. The exercise also helps to improve your mood.

**Get your vitamin- D-** whether it's through the absorption of sunlight or consumption of vitamin D rich foods such as milk, egg yolks, and tuna, vitamin D [has been shown](#) to reduce symptoms of depression.

**Keep warm and cozy-** being uncomfortable can bring the blues. Enjoy a hot cup of tea, a cozy blanket, a snuggle with a pet, and find your own ways to enjoy the nice parts of winter.

If you believe that your symptoms are more severe, consult a health care provider who can prescribe you with proper treatment you are in need of.

Hopefully these tips can help you to make your days merry and bright all winter long!