Seasonal Affective Disorder – Not Just the Winter Blues

The days are getting shorter, and the nights are getting longer and longer. It's wetter and colder than it's been in 6 months and you are feeling tired and less motivated to do some of your regular activities. Is it just the change in season or a case of the winter blues? Or perhaps there's a bit more going on in your body and brain?

Sometimes it's hard to tell, but a case of the winter blues will usually pass in a few days, and does not overwhelm you or your ability to function. However, if these feelings persist or seem to be more intense than expected, you might be dealing with Seasonal Affective Disorder. Below is a list of general symptoms, including:

- Feeling depressed most of the day almost every day
- Feeling tired every day
- Losing interest in activities you normally enjoy
- Having low energy
- Oversleeping
- Appetite changes and craving food high in carbohydrates
- Weight gain
- Feeling sluggish
- Decreased concentration
- Feeling hopeless

What causes Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)?

As the season changes and the days get shorter, the reduced level of sunlight may disrupt your body's internal clock leading to feelings of depression. Reduced sunlight can also lead to a drop in the brain chemical Serotonin, which can also trigger feelings of depression. A decrease in another important brain chemical, Melatonin, can disrupt sleep patterns and mood.

What can you do?

Some people with SAD benefit from treatment such as medications and psychotherapy so it's a good idea to speak with your doctor to see what would be appropriate for you, however there are some simple ways to help yourself at home, including:

- Make your environment sunnier and brighter by opening blinds and curtains, trimming tree branches that might block light coming in, or add a skylight to your house.
- Get outside as much as possible by taking a walk, sitting on a park bench, eating lunch on a patio or in a park
- Exercise regularly either inside or outside. Regular exercise has been shown to improve mood and energy
- Socialize and connect with people you enjoy being around to give yourself a little boost
- Consider investing in a light box which some find helpful during these darker, shorter days