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DREADING THE WINTER BLUES?
PREPARE FOR DREARY DAYS NOW, SAYS UD PSYCHOLOGIST

DAYTON, Ohio — Before the last present under the tree is unwrapped and even before the jack-o-lantern starts drooping, it’s time to prepare for the winter blues.

As winter approaches and the days get shorter, people’s bodies and moods change, says Tom Rueth, a psychologist at the University of Dayton.

“As it gets grayer, we get cooler — emotionally and physically,” says Rueth, an associate professor of counselor education and human services at UD. “For some of us, climate and darkness result in a major production of melatonin,” Rueth says. The hormone melatonin, which is not produced in sunlight, lowers body temperature and may explain the cause of some common symptoms of winter depression such as craving carbohydrates, gaining weight and sleeping more often.

Rueth says this melatonin-induced “hibernation” period can be attributed to circadian rhythms or the 24-hour cycle of the earth’s rotation and may stem from early agrarian cultures. “Before electricity, humans had to be very effective in the daylight,” he says.

“There are two ends of the continuum for winter depression,” Rueth says. “On one end there’s the winter blues or the ‘Miami Valley Miseries,’ as I like to call it, for those of us living in the Dayton area. On the other end is Seasonal Affective Disorder, which is a serious psychiatric disorder.”

Rueth says only about 6 percent of the U.S. population suffers from Seasonal Affective Disorder, which is indicated by major depression and possibly suicidal thoughts during the same season each year. More people, about 25 percent in the U.S., suffer from the winter blues — the name for the frustration and gloom that many people experience during October through March.

The most highly recommended treatment for seasonal depression is phototherapy, Rueth says. Some people are able to offset the blues by using bright lights, 2,500 to 10,000 lux (a -over-
brightly lit office is usually about 500 lux and a sunny day in Florida can be as high 80,000 lux).
Rueth says the key is to start using the lights in the fall before depression sets in. He says the light must hit the retina to be effective.

Another way to use phototherapy is to put lights on an automatic timer to simulate dawn and sunset. “By gradually increasing and decreasing the light as you sleep, you can simulate longer days,” Rueth says. He says it also important to spend time outdoors and eat a high carbohydrate diet to produce energy.

“There’s a lot of stresses associated with the winter months,” Rueth says. The weather, difficult driving, busy holidays and cabin fever contribute to winter-time stress, he says.

It becomes even more important to live holistically — to take care of the mind, body and spirit — during the winter months, Rueth says.

He suggests:

• Get as much light as possible. Make your home and office brighter with lights and paint.

• Plan ahead and schedule things to look forward to during the winter months.

• Be physically active. Find winter activities such as ice skating, skiing or simply visiting museums.

• Do a weekly winter tune-up. “Set a day each week to ask yourself ‘what’s my mood, and what should I do to make it better?’” Rueth says.

Winter depression is a not a new problem, says Rueth, who spent 10 years as the chief of crisis services at the Eastway Community Mental Health Center before joining UD’s School of Education. He says research suggests that religious holidays such as Christmas and Hanukkah are celebrated in the latter part of the year, not because they coincide with a calendar anniversary but because they were blended with ancient pagan festivals like the “festival of lights” or other holidays that celebrated the sun during the winter’s dark days.

For media interviews, call Tom Rueth at (937) 229-3688. For more information, call Erika Mattingly at (937) 229-3212.