

Classifieds

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Beat the winter blues

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

About 5% of the U.S. population experiences seasonal depression — also known as the “winter blues” — a subtype of depression that typically occurs when the seasons change. It most commonly affects people starting in the fall and continues into the winter months.

Jeannie Larson with the University of Minnesota talks about what causes seasonal depression, its symptoms and what people can do to lessen the symptoms.

Q: What causes seasonal depression?

Prof. Larson: Essentially seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is caused by a reduced level of sunlight beginning in the fall and continues through the winter months. This change of daylight may affect a person’s serotonin level, thus impacting mood. Research suggests lower levels of serotonin are linked to depression.

Q: How common is seasonal depression?

Prof. Larson: A study done in 2013 found the prevalence of SAD approaches 10% in northern latitudes, which makes sense because the further one is from the equator, the lesser amount of sunlight. On average, about 5% of the U.S. population experiences seasonal depression depending on geographical region. There is a higher rate of SAD among women and, on average, people start to feel the effects of SAD between 20-30 years old.

Q: What are the symptoms of seasonal depression?

Prof. Larson: According to the Mental Health America National Organization, symptoms of seasonal depression can be similar to those that occur with depression. It can sometimes be difficult to discern SAD from other types of depression. However, keeping in mind there are similarities, a diagnosis of seasonal depression can only be made after two consecutive occurrences of depression that begin and end at the same time every year, with the symptoms subsiding the rest of the year.

However, there are symptoms associated with SAD such as:

- Depression: misery, guilt, loss of self-esteem, hopelessness, diminished interest in activities, despair, and apathy;
- Anxiety: tension and inability to tolerate stress;
- Mood changes: extremes of

mood and, in some, periods of mania in spring and summer;

- Sleep problems: desire to oversleep and difficulty staying awake or, sometimes, disturbed sleep and early morning waking;
- Change in eating habits: carbohydrate craving, increased appetite, weight gain;
- Lethargy: feeling of fatigue and inability to carry out normal routine;
- Social problems: irritability and desire to avoid social contact;
- Sexual problems: loss of libido and decreased interest in physical contact.

Q: What are some preventative measures people can take to lessen their seasonal depression symptoms?

Prof. Larson: I recommend starting a daily practice now to establish a routine when it may be more difficult to initiate one later. Research suggests a simple routine, such as going outside for 30 minutes each day, can improve your overall well-being. These effects can include stress reduction, increased physical activity and better sleep quality.

Q: What are you doing to advance knowledge on seasonal depression?

Prof. Larson: I’m part of an interdisciplinary team of scientists in the Department of Epidemiology and the Department of Forestry looking at the effects of walking within green and suburban environments on participants’ psychological (e.g., anxiety and mood) and cognitive (e.g., directed-attention) outcomes.

Jeannie Larson is assistant professor in the Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing and manages the Nature-based Therapeutic Services at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum of the University of Minnesota. Her areas of expertise include therapeutic horticulture, animal assisted interactions, therapeutic landscapes and more.

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Master the art of perfectly creamy mashed potatoes

Mashed potatoes are the perfect side dish, capable of being paired with meats, poultry and fish. Few meals wouldn’t benefit from the addition of creamy mashed potatoes.

Some food historians say that the original recipe for mashed potatoes originated in 1771, when a Frenchman named Antoine Parmentier hosted a competition on ways to prepare potatoes. Others say that mashed potatoes surely were born in Great Britain in the 1600s, as potatoes were a staple of the English diet at that time. Regardless of the origin of mashed potatoes, a solid understanding of how to perfect this beloved side dish is a great way to impress family members and guests. This recipe for “Easiest, Creamiest Mashed Potatoes” from “Simple Soirées: Seasonal Menus for Sensational Dinner Parties” (Stewart, Tabori & Chang) by Peggy Knickerbocker is one every mashed potato lover will fall in love with.



EASIEST, CREAMIEST MASHED POTATOES

Serves 6

Ingredients:

- 6 medium-sized russet potatoes, peeled and quartered
- 3 to 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 cup whole milk or cream (or half-and-half)
- Salt and freshly ground white pepper

Directions:

Place the potatoes in a large pot and cover with salted cold water. Bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium-high, and cook for 15 to 20 minutes, until the potatoes are tender when pierced with a fork. Drain. Meanwhile in a small pot, warm the butter and milk over medium-low heat.

Place the potatoes in a large bowl and mash them with a potato masher, adding a little of the warm milk-and-butter mixture as you go. Continue to mash until the lumps are gone. Add just enough of the milk mixture to get a creamy consistency. Then whip the potatoes with a fork and season with salt and pepper to taste.

You can make the potatoes a little ahead of time and keep them warm in a low oven, well covered, until ready to serve.

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