



Beating the Blues

Staying active during the winter is just as good for your mind as it is for your body.

by JAYME OTTO

Chelle Quinn had run 30 miles every week during the spring and summer. She'd monitored her heart rate, done the recommended hill sprints and intervals and kept a meticulous training log that proved she was capable of hitting her 4:00 marathon goal time. On the overcast October morning of the Chicago Marathon, the 36-year-old Mechanicsville, VA, resident reminded herself that she was ready; that this was the moment she'd been looking forward to, visualizing and dreaming about all season.

Her positive thoughts didn't help. All she felt was dread.

Quinn would go on to run the worst marathon of her life in 5:03—a difficult time to reconcile for a seasoned runner who coached the Sportsbacker's Marathon Training Team for the Richmond Marathon every year. **Her downfall? The season.**

A SAD Story

According to stress expert Kathleen Hall Ph.D., about 20 percent of the population is effected by Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), a variation of major depression where people with otherwise normal mental health experience depressive symptoms during the winter including: hopelessness, anxiety, loss of energy, social withdrawal, oversleeping, loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, craving foods high in carbohydrates, weight gain and difficulty concentrating and processing information.

For Quinn, it had become harder and harder to train for her marathon once the weather started changing and the days became shorter. Come race day, her fitness level was actually worse than it had been in the summer. "I just had no energy," she says. For active women like Quinn, symptoms of SAD, and its milder version, Subsyndromal Seasonal Affective Disorder, can make staying

motivated to exercise during an already challenging time of the year seem impossible. To further complicate matters, SAD's warning signs are hard to differentiate from some

of the heavy emotions that arise during the holidays, the schedule disruptions that come from having the kids home on winter break and taking vacation time from work, the stress from increased social obligations and the circadian rhythm changes due to shorter, colder days.

According to Florida Neuroscience Center's Gabriela Cora, M.D., author of *Leading Under Pressure, Strategies to Avoid Burnout, Increase Energy, and Improve Your Well-Being*, it's a common misconception to consider symptoms of SAD as a normal part of the holiday season. "This prohibits people from taking action to get the help they need," she says.

Fortunately, people who exercise are actually better equipped to recognize SAD symptoms in their training, and more likely to speak up when their performance is compromised.

"I finally went to my doctor because my fall marathons were going so poorly every

year, and my training just got worse through the winter, which meant my spring running would suffer, too," Quinn says. At first, her doctor thought she could be battling depression, but upon reviewing her training log, was able find the root of her issues in the fall and winter months.

Quinn's symptoms were typical of SAD—difficulty getting motivated to do morning workouts once it got cold and dark, getting off schedule and then unable to get back on the steady routine she kept during the warmer months, running less, sleeping more, increased irritability and more anxiety. "My running partners even noticed it," Quinn says. "April through September, I'm this positive, bouncy woman, and then come October, I become this negative ball of energy that doesn't show up for runs, and when I do, well, I'm so irritable that they kind of wish I didn't."

Putting the Winter Blues to Bed

Once someone has recognized a winter pattern in her symptoms, the good news is that lifestyle strategies are at the top of the list for combating SAD. "It's even possible to stop the symptoms from happening at all once you know how," Cora says.

The key to keeping SAD at bay and maintaining a healthy lifestyle in the winter is to stay active. A recent study on the anti-depressant Zoloft proved that exercise was just as effective in warding off depression as medication. How? Exercise increases the neurotransmitters in the brain (norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin) and natural endorphins that regulate mood and give you that "feel good glow," according to nutritional biochemist Shawn Talbott, Ph.D.

"There's definitely a mindset shift when you realize you're not just running for your physical health, but also your mental wellbeing," Quinn says. Like most of us, she tended to cut her workouts when feeling stressed or anxious, but now makes them a priority. "I know now that not running just makes me more stressed and anxious."

Quinn also realized how important being outside was for her general wellbeing. "I feel trapped indoors on a treadmill," she says. She started running in the park around the kids' football field after dropping them off for practice. "It's not as much mileage as I like, but I'm learning to let that go—that for me, the important thing in the fall and winter is getting out there," she says.

Feel Good Foods and Supplements

Nutritional Biochemist Shawn Talbott shares some dieting do's for fighting (and preventing) those SAD symptoms.

Carbs

When taken as small snacks throughout the day (slice of toast with jelly, granola bar, pack of instant oatmeal), carbs can help to boost production of serotonin in the brain (low serotonin is thought to be a primary cause of SAD and general depression). But be careful: eating too many carbs—more than about 30 grams or 120 calories at a time—can leave you feeling sleepy instead of happy.

Vitamins A, C & E

These vitamins keep the immune system functioning properly, which helps to fight the cold/flu viruses that can drag you down at this time of the year. Good food sources of ACE are squash, sweet potatoes and citrus fruits.

Eurycoma Longifolia

(Also called Malaysian ginseng)

Used in traditional medicine for improving vitality (which is very low in people with SAD) by as much as 30 percent. Eurycoma extract works by restoring the balance between the hormones cortisol and testosterone, which can become unbalanced due to stress, sleep loss, or poor diet—all of which can be at play during the winter months when SAD is at its peak.

Fish Oil

Helps with both mood and dry skin, thanks to a high content of omega-3 fatty acids. You can get omega-3s from fatty fish such as tuna or salmon, as well from a daily intake of 2-3 grams of fish oil supplements.

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Did you know?

Women suffering from SAD outnumber men 4 to 1.