

Embracing The Winter Blues
Delia Chiaramonte, M.D.
Cara Michele Nether, L.Ac., M.Ac., NADA RT

The days are short. The nights are cold. Many people find themselves feeling tired, sluggish and sad as the warm, long summer days fade away. Some call it the “winter blues,” some call it “Seasonal Affective Disorder,” but there is another way to look at this interesting cold-weather phenomenon. In this article we will offer two unique perspectives on the effects of winter on our mood and well-being: that of an Oriental medicine practitioner and that of a Western trained physician.

Cara Michele Nether, L.Ac., M.Ac., NADA RT

Much of Oriental Medicine is based on the theory of Yin and Yang -- the two opposite, interdependent, and complementary forces that affect the universe and everything in it. Yin and Yang are opposites; applied to the seasons, summer is the opposite of winter. Summer brings blooming flowers and hot temperatures, while the winter landscape is bare and cold. In the summer the animals are lively and energetic and so, you may have noticed, are we. In the winter many animals are in full or partial hibernation and we feel the urge to snuggle up someplace warm and rest.

Oriental medical theory states that we are as much a part of nature as any other creature and thus, for optimal health, we must follow the laws of nature as all those creatures do -- approaching winter as a time of rest and regeneration and summer as a time of energy and excitement. Following this paradigm, is it any surprise that we feel sluggish as the days get colder and shorter? Until recently, with the invention of the light bulb, humans behaved as many animals do – actively pursuing chores during the daylight hours and resting when the sunlight had faded. Some would say that we are genetically programmed to rest and restore our energy when it is dark.

Oriental medicine emphasizes that we must listen to our bodies – they are wise and should be approached with reverence. Your winter fatigue may be your body’s instruction to rest. We must value this information as completely as we would value a message from a trusted friend.

We must honor our bodies even when it goes against our cultural norms. In our society, the winter holiday season is not generally a time of rest. Social events can be fun and it is flattering when friends and family include us in their celebrations. Yet the effort required to prepare for, dress for, and cook for yet another party can begin to feel like a burden. If you find yourself dreading your social obligations, perhaps you should reconsider them. Be selective. Attend only those events that feed your spirit and avoid the ones that deplete it. Remember the value of rest.

Delia Chiaramonte, M.D.

Seasonal Affective Disorder is diagnosed when a person suffers from depression, fatigue, irritability, and excess sleepiness primarily in the winter months. It is likely related to decreased levels of the neurotransmitter Serotonin in the brain and is usually treated with

medication and light therapy. I believe in this diagnosis and have seen the treatments work. But is it really the whole story? I can't help but wonder what happens to us, human primates that we are, when we disregard our basic need for rest and sleep. What happens when we choose instead to watch late-night TV or stay out until midnight and then use a morning jolt of caffeine to help our tired bodies stay alert?

Perhaps the winter season is a time for self-reflection and semi-hibernation. While we can't snuggle under the covers until Spring, we can choose to skip a party or two in favor of a cozy evening in front of the fireplace. Instead of fighting our rhythms, we can choose to honor them. This is not easy. In my medical practice I have seen countless examples of people who ignore their bodies and end up sicker than they need to be: disregarded stomach pain that became an ulcer, ignored leg pain that became a stress fracture.

Our bodies are talking to us and we owe it to them to listen. Perhaps we are tired in the winter because we are ignoring our body's plea for more sleep. Instead of chaos and action, this winter strive for rest and rejuvenation. If you are depressed, by all means see your doctor; you might benefit from antidepressants and light therapy. Yet whether or not you have Seasonal Affective Disorder, devote some time as the days grow shorter to deciphering what your body is asking you for. Does it need more rest? Go to bed earlier. More connection with loved ones? Plan time for quiet chats. In our fast-moving society there is always something that has to be done... yet sometimes doing less is really doing more.

Dr. Chiamonte is a private Health Advocate and the founder of Insight Medical Consultants. She has been quoted by CNN, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today as an expert on patient advocacy.

www.InsightMedicalConsultants.com