



January 2020 Enhance Webinar: Understanding and Battling the Winter Blues, presented by Monica Kramer McConkey

Dairy Girl Network kicked off 2020 by hosting Monica Kramer McConkey, LPC, from Eyes on the Horizon Consulting for their first webinar of 2020 entitled “Understanding and Battling the Winter Blues.” This was a great way to start 2020 and continue their focus on mental health. They also want to stress that this discussion can continue year-round, and DGN encourages you to use the hashtag #StrongerTogether when you post on social media.

Monica discussed three key topics during her presentation. First, she explained what exactly the winter blues are. Then, she went into what causes the feelings you may experience when you have the winter blues/SAD. She finished her discussion with tips, tricks and strategies to implement in your everyday life to combat the harsh side effects of this mental illness.

The winter blues are feelings of depression or deep unhappiness associated with experiencing the cold and darkness of winter. This may manifest as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). SAD is focused on abnormal moods that may occur in a seasonal order. There are different diagnostic criteria when diagnosing SAD vs. the winter blues. Monica shared with us that 10 million Americans have SAD or have experienced it in some way. On top of that, 10-20% of people have mild symptoms. She also noted that SAD is four times more common in women than men.

There are many potential causes for the winter blues, but three are heavily researched and stand out above the rest. The first is darkness. Due to it being dark in the winter, the body stimulates a larger amount of melatonin. Melatonin is typically created when preparing the body for sleep, thus making you tired and sleepy. This is more common in the winter because it is dark for longer periods. Another potential cause relates to the regulation of your serotonin levels. Serotonin is the happy hormone that influences your mood and is triggered by warmth, sunlight and socialization. These are all things we are lacking in the winter. The final potential cause is Vitamin D production since there is minimum sunlight in the winter. We are also typically more covered up by our winter clothing and not getting sunlight on our skin as we do in summer.

Often, the basic symptoms of the winter blues/SAD can vary between people and come in many different levels, but may manifest in the following ways:

- Feelings of hopelessness and sadness
- Thoughts of suicide

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- Hypersomnia or the tendency to oversleep
- Change in appetite
- Weight gain
- Heavy feeling in your arms or legs
- Drop in energy level
- Decreased physical activity
- Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability
- Increased sensitivity to social rejection
- Avoidance of social situations

To handle the winter blues/SAD, there are also many different strategies and coping mechanisms you can try. Different activities may work for different people. Be intentional about the ones that you are trying and do not give up after trying just one for a day or two. Activities for combating the winter blues/SAD include:

- Have your bedroom lights turn on a half hour before you're supposed to wake up
- Expose yourself to sunlight as early as you can in the day
- Use an artificial light
- Exercise, exercise, exercise!
- Watch your cravings
- Set a goal
- Break out of a rut by mixing it up and getting out of your normal routine
- Cozy up in your home by painting, sewing or creating a new piece of artwork
- Focus on learning about acceptance and mindset
- Make a winter bonfire
- Plan a coffee date with friends
- Create a book club
- Take a hot bath or go to the local community center's sauna
- Meditate and journal
- Try new recipes
- Plant fresh flowers
- Embrace hibernation

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An important part of this portion of Monica's presentation covered seeking help when you need it. Seeking help for your mental health is no different than if you have a physical medical issue come up. You should be equating your mental health just like you do with your physical health. It is totally okay and normal to seek help with your mental health. You should start by talking to your primary care provider and from there, they can refer you to a therapist. Often times, your insurance provider may cover your mental health expenses.

The final part of Monica's presentation covered how we can ring in the New Year with intentionality. The agriculture industry in 2019 had it particularly hard, especially the dairy industry, but Monica encouraged us to look back at all the great things we accomplished. Often, we do not dwell on our accomplishments and instead focus on the negative. Focusing on the positive is a complete mind shift. One way you can do this is by paging through your 2019 calendar and noting the big things you did. Another part of this is practicing gratitude every day. This again will help you open up your mindset to focus on the positives and shift your perspective. Finally, Monica encouraged us all to keep moving forward. We cannot change the past, but instead we can move on and focus on the future.

We would like to thank Monica for spending time with us and discussing this very important topic.

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