

Dancing in the Rain: The Effects of Weather on Mood

Randy Heller, PhD, LMFT, LMHC

I remember during a bout in the hospital a nurse entered my room before I was ready to awaken. As she ripped open the shades, she sang “rise and shine.” At that moment, I wondered with annoyance why she might be doing such a terrible thing to me?! All I really wanted to do was to put my head under the covers and slip back into darkness. She must have known *that was not a good thing to do* – darkness would not promote wellness.

We often hear in songs the implication through metaphor that sunshine equates with happiness (i.e., *You Are My Sunshine, You Are the Sunshine of My Life, Let the Sunshine In*); or through prose and poetry, where darkness equates to grief and light equates to pleasure. As a psychotherapist, I have often suggested to clients that if they are feeling troubled or depressed, they could consider taking a walk outside, heading to the beach, or in any way that they can, take in the sunshine and “brighten their day.” Given this notion, let’s contemplate, just how much does weather affect our mood?

What is the problem?

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) published by the American Psychiatric Association provides specific criteria, language classification, and treatment of mental conditions. Up until its most recent revision in 2013, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) was listed in the DSM. SAD is characterized by patterns of depressive symptoms (i.e., poor sleep, eating, and mood) that begin to emerge in the fall and decrease with the onset of spring. A familiar layman’s term for this is the “winter blues.” Typically, there is a lower incidence of symptoms in people who live in sunnier climates. Research suggests that the absorption of light into the brain facilitates the production of serotonin – often referred to as the “feel good” chemical in our brains that is found in antidepressant medications. Traditional clinical treatments for SAD typically include, but are not limited to light therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy.

Possibilities for Brightening the “Blues”?

Winter isn't the only thing that could cause the effects of SAD – but rather any weather event such as cloud cover that could result in darkness, and other activities that result in a lack of sunlight. Ironically, I have been writing this article over the past weeks in the month of July in South Florida. During this time, a typical morning weather report includes a discussion of early sunshine followed by stormy afternoons and evenings. My writing has led me to consider, how this weather affects my mood, and what I do to lift my spirits when it is “dark.”

To that end, I recognize that feeling “dark” when it is gloomy outside may be a natural first response. Thinking in this way allows me the freedom to consider possibilities for changing my mood. I then think about what I can do to brighten things up. That may involve bringing light into my space in a multitude of ways. For me, candlelight sets a mood and a tone of warmth and comfort. Additional activities may include turning on music that alters my state of mind, or

doing something that increases my “feel good” chemicals such as exercise, watching a romantic comedy, or, writing this article. Specifically, I attend to what I can do differently to promote feeling otherwise, and this will vary for each individual. For anyone experiencing these symptoms without improvement over a prolonged period of time, I would encourage seeking the help of a professional.

Most importantly, as I suggest about all circumstances in life, it is not what happens but how we respond to it that either renders us Ok or not... In my experience, “Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass ...It's about learning to dance in the rain.” (Unknown)