

Friday, February 29, 2008

Teacher Survival Strategies

Turn the "Winter Blues" into a "Rainbow of Delight"

Your mental outlook affects your feeling of well being. And, this is more important during the winter months at temperate latitudes because the absence of sunlight is known to affect mood. There are physical and chemical explanations for this "depressing" phenomena. (No pun intended; We didn't coin this term or acronym.)

The official term for the "Wintertime Blues" is Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) (No pun intended).

"Feeling blue and depressed during the dark, cold winter months? According to a study published in the British medical journal, The Lancet (December 7, 2002; 360:1840-1842), this dip in mood may be caused by lowered levels of serotonin, a chemical in the brain. Serotonin levels are low in people with depression and also in healthy people during the winter (SAD)." Source: Tan Plus for Health <http://www.tanplusforhealth.com/news/january/blues.htm> Of course, Classroom Toolkit isn't promoting tanning salons. We are taking a professional spin on the topic. However, increasing exposure to winter light, by being outside, maybe removing your sunglasses, going outside (even in the cold) can help. "SAD is thought to be caused by decreased exposure to sunlight and causes symptoms identical to those of major depression from other causes. They include low mood, tearfulness, inability to concentrate, impaired sleep patterns, weight gain, irritability and even thoughts of suicide. In Alaska, over eight percent of the population is thought to suffer from SAD. Many other states have rates of three or four or five percent. Think about that: We may be talking about over ten million Americans." Source: Dr. Rock Positano The Huffington

Post http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-rock-positano/winter-depression-otherw_b_85066.html

Could the SAD epidemic be affecting you, someone in your family, or one or more of your students? Probably!

So, what are you to do?

Bright light therapy seems to help, i.e., exposure each day to a high-intensity light.

So, why don't school districts install these lights in each classroom?

After all, concentration and the ability to work; especially the ability to work with others in a pleasant environment, with an agreeable mood is crucial for maximizing everyone's learning and performance.

Besides, many states schedule high-stakes tests during the late winter, a time when the long-term effects of sunlight deprivation are most felt.

Answer: There is no panacea. Bright light therapy can have its pitfalls.

Sidebar There are drawbacks to high intensity light therapy: i.e., skin problems and triggering more energy in bipolar folks. "Bright light therapy isn't to be used by certain folks with eye conditions or skin conditions that prohibit exposure to high intensity light. They can also rarely cause someone vulnerable to bipolar disorder to experience too much energy and even manic symptoms." Source: Dr. Rock Positano The Huffington

Post http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-rock-positano/winter-depression-otherw_b_85066.html

So, school districts won't install bright light hotspots, even though these lights could improve the lives (and the performance) of between three and eight percent of teacher and student population. This is because of the threat of lawsuits.

What about the rare case of making people with eye or skin problems worse. What about the rare case of launching a bipolar student, teacher or administrator into a fit of energy?

Even though these lights could mean the difference between a school district making "Adequate Yearly Progress" on the high-stakes tests mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), "the fear of the few or the none" (to paraphrase a certain television and big-screen alien of the pointed-ears-kind) prevents our schools from taking definitive action.

High Intensity Solutions

Since the SAD problem is probably a symptom caused by a lack of serotonin in the brains of those people that are affected. are their other wayst to increase this brain chemical without providing additional exposure to high intensity light?

In particular, what about self-hypnosis, visualization, positive suggestion?

What about movement and dance therapy?

For a great online source, see <http://tinyclips.com/2tx4jylts> An Introduction To Medical Dance/Movement Therapy: Health Care In

Motion" Book Review <http://tinyclips.com/2tx4jylts> a Continuum, Grumpy! Whatever solution that you decide to implement, the first step is your awareness that SAD is a real problem that affects you and your teaching.

You (or your students) don't have to cross over the line to "sub-clinical depression" to feel the effects of minimal sunlight during the winter months.

If you know that students, teachers, administrators, parents (even yourself) tend toward the grouchy-grumpy side of the "Irritability Scale" by winter's end; you can take steps (no pun intended) to help everyone keep their distance from one another.

Individual projects (rather than group work) might be in order.

Also, help students by "providing less time when their teacher drones on;" i.e., talk less, give short instructions, and make allowance for everyone's lower frustration tolerance.

In addition, decrease stressors, limit test-taking practice.

Offer positive suggestions for comfort, friendliness, calm. Make life easier on everyone.

Remember: Even though three to eight percent of your campus population may be experiencing symptoms of SAD that reach clinical levels, almost everyone is affected.

Sidebar There isn't a classroom that won't be effected by even one clinically depressed student or teacher.

This is because of 1.) a process called entrainment, and 2.) because the chaos of the depressed person's thoughts and moods drives everyone else a little bit "crazy," too.

Since you know that the SAD "epidemic" strikes every year, and that the symptoms Peak during high-stakes testing time; develop strategies to compensate.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Teacher Survival Strategies at 03:00