

Beating the Pandemic Blues

Mental health during the winter months can be impacted by Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) and the winter blues. In the winter of 2020-2021, the COVID-19 pandemic also took a toll on mental health. Extension Educators partnered with their university's Chief Wellness Officer to offer a six-part webinar series for faculty, staff, and students to help with SAD and the pandemic blues. The educators also offered a series for the public. Survey results indicate for most sessions, over 90% of participants reported they could use the information presented to cope with current circumstances and agreed the information presented would help them.

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2020 NEAFCS Virtual Annual Session

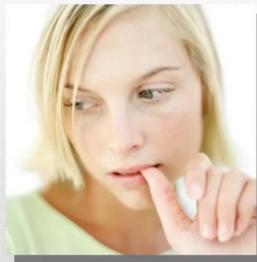


OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION



Symptoms of SAD

- Changes in appetite or weight
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Fatigue and decreased energy
- Inability to concentrate
- Irritability
- Social withdrawal
- Sadness, anxiety, hopelessness



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The year 2020 was like no other as the entire world faced a “once in a lifetime” global pandemic. Mental health concerns surfaced among youth and adults alike as they struggled to cope with COVID-19 and its widespread impacts on daily life. A survey of over 1,500 teenagers commissioned by the National 4-H Council in May 2020 found that 70% were struggling with their mental health. Of those surveyed, almost two-thirds (64%) said they believed the pandemic would have a lasting impact on their mental health. Similarly, a survey commissioned by the Kaiser Family Foundation in July 2020 found that 53% of adults in the United States felt their mental health had been negatively impacted by worry and stress associated with the pandemic (Panchal et al., 2020).

As the pandemic stretched into the fall and winter months of 2020, mental health concerns were compounded by Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) and the winter blues for certain individuals. SAD is a type of depression displaying a recurring seasonal pattern, typically starting in the late fall or early winter, and going away in the spring and summer (Galima et al., 2020). Recent articles on SAD prevalence (Galima et al., 2020; Melrose, 2015) cite research studies that estimate 10-20% of cases of recurrent depression follow a seasonal pattern (Magnusson, 2000) and associate the prevalence of SAD with distance from the equator (Rosen et al., 1990; Horowitz, 2008). A 1990 research study of SAD prevalence at four locations in the United States found a high

prevalence of 9.7% in New Hampshire and a low prevalence of 1.4% in Florida (Rosen et al., 1990), and a later study found the prevalence of SAD in the United States ranges from 1% in Florida to 9% in Alaska (Horowitz, 2008).

OBJECTIVE

For Extension professionals in the northern half of the country, sharing information about SAD with the public may be warranted. For educators everywhere, sharing mental health resources and offering support for individuals suffering through the pandemic was vital. The purpose of this paper is to share how a team of Extension Educators created a “Beating the Winter Pandemic Blues” series that they delivered and evaluated in December 2020 – January 2021.

METHOD

In 2018, a county-based Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Educator for Ohio State University (OSU) Extension developed a presentation titled “Beating the Winter Blues” that outlines signs, symptoms, and risk factors for SAD and covers evidence-based strategies to promote physical, mental, and social health in the winter months. The presentation was reviewed by an FCS Educator for OSU Extension in a neighboring county.

Between January 2018 and January 2020, the author and reviewer shared this presentation with 32 individuals.

The content attracted a universal audience; participants ranged from young adults to seniors who attended presentations at a worksite, a church, a senior housing center, and on a college campus.

In September 2020, the author and reviewer shared the content of their “Beating the Winter Blues”

presentation in a concurrent session during the National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (NEAFCS) annual session. Much to their surprise, 150 individuals from various parts of the country attended the live session, and 27 individuals from 11 different states requested their slide set after the session. This experience indicated universal interest in strategies to beat the winter blues regardless of geographic location, as the strategies shared in the “Beating the Winter Blues” presentation may also be framed as evidence-based strategies to beat the *pandemic blues*.

Following the 2020 NEAFCS annual session, the author and reviewer of the “Beating the Winter Blues” presentation convened a team of five FCS Educators to create a series on strategies to beat the winter pandemic blues. The topics in the series included:

1. Beating the Winter Pandemic Blues (an overview)
2. Beating the Blues with Exercise
3. Beating the Blues by Unplugging
4. Beating the Blues with Humor
5. Beating the Blues through Connection

In October 2020, the team approached the Office of the Chief Wellness Officer (CWO) at OSU and offered to present their series to the campus community. In April 2020, the CWO launched a wellness webinar series titled “Staying Calm and Well in the Midst of the COVID-19 Storm” to help university faculty, staff, and students stay well during the pandemic. The series consisted of eight sessions that covered topics such as coping with stress and building resilience. In August 2020, citing the success of the first “Staying Calm and Well” series, a seven-week part two of the series kicked off. The team of FCS Educators asked whether the CWO intended to launch a part three of the popular “Staying Calm and Well” series, suggested a theme of Beating the Winter Pandemic Blues for a part three, and offered to present their sessions to the campus community. A third series was planned for December 2020 – January 2021 consisting of the five sessions created and presented by the FCS educators, as well as a sixth session on the winter blues and depression that was presented by the CWO. Four of the five sessions (sessions one through four in the list above) were also presented to Extension clientele via a webinar series in January 2021. Each session was 30-minutes in length, and they were delivered using the Zoom webinar platform with a post-session evaluation at the end of each presentation.

The program evaluation that participants were asked to complete after each session of the “Staying Calm and Well” series included the following statements:

1. I can use the information from this session to cope with current circumstances.
2. I plan to use the content that I learned from this session on a regular basis.
3. I believe the information in this session will help me take better care of my health and wellbeing.

For each question, response options included strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree.

Participants who attended sessions in the “Beating the Winter Pandemic Blues” series for Extension clientele were asked to complete a program evaluation after each session that included the following questions:

Did you learn new information today? Yes or no.

- If yes, please list one new thing you learned today.

Will you use the information presented today?

Definitely, probably, probably not, or definitely not.

- If yes, please share how you will use the information presented today.

RESULTS

For the five sessions in the “Staying Calm and Well” series, the average attendance per session was 598 people participating live and 401 people viewing the recording later. The average response rate for post-session evaluations was 99%. Among those who completed evaluations, 92% indicated they could use the information presented to cope with current circumstances, 91% agreed the information presented would help them take better care of their health and wellbeing, and 90% were planning to use the content they learned on a regular basis. Evaluation data for each session in this series is displayed in Table 1.

For the sessions in the “Beating the Winter Blues” four-part series, the average attendance per session was 71 and the average response rate for post-session evaluations was 26%. Among those who completed evaluations, 93% indicated they learned new information and 84% were planning to use the content they learned. Evaluation data for each session in this series is displayed in Table 2.

When asked to share what they learned, participant responses varied and included the following:

- The difference between winter blues and SAD
- That I am not alone
- Gratitude can help you destress
- Uni-tasking
- The 20/20/20 rule to give my eyes a break
- Strategies to limit screen time
- Suggestions for tech-free mealtime
- Exercising in increments is still OK!
- Any amount of exercise is better than none
- The mental health benefits of exercise
- Laughter can relieve pain
- How little adults laugh compared to children
- How much stress can be reduced with laughter

When asked to share how they were planning to use the information presented, participant responses included the following:

- Try to reach out to more friends and family during this season
- Try to get more sleep
- Try to get outside more as I know it can help
- Get back into an exercise routine
- Take more breaks from the screen
- Turn off phone notifications, especially news headlines
- Delete/unsubscribe to email newsletters I am not interested in reading
- Restore the practice of turning off screens 1-2 hours before bedtime
- Be more intentional about incorporating laughter into my life
- Watch humorous videos and shows every day to reap the benefits
- Laugh more, and check out (funny) memes or videos when I need a boost

Keep this info in mind when interacting with others-- they may be struggling as well

SUMMARY

People of all ages struggled with mental health challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. As winter approached, a team of FCS Educators realized that struggles related to Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) could compound the challenges many people were already experiencing related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The educators' collaboration with the

university's Chief Wellness Officer (CWO) allowed them to provide information about Seasonal Affective Disorder and the pandemic blues in a timely manner to faculty, staff, and students within their university community. Results from the series indicate on average 92% of participants could use the information presented to cope with current circumstances, 91% could use the information to better take care of their health and wellbeing, and 90% planned to use the information they learned regularly. Additionally, an average of 93% of participants in the four-part "Beating the Winter Blues" series indicated they learned new information and, on average, 84% were planning to use the information.

These results are limited, however, because participants in the "Staying Calm and Well" series were mostly staff enrolled in the OSU Health Plan. By attending the webinars, participants enrolled in the health plan's wellness program earned points that could be redeemed for gift cards or other health and wellness incentives. One could conclude that the participants already had more of an interest in and a willingness to adopt health practices than the general population. OSU was the first university in the U.S. to hire a Chief Wellness Officer, which demonstrates the commitment of the organization to promoting the overall health and wellness of the greater university community. Employees are regularly encouraged to practice self-care and to participate in activities, programs, and educational offerings that promote health and wellness. People who work for companies or organizations where this support and encouragement is lacking may not be as willing or able to use the information, even though they may desire to participate.

Participants in the "Beating the Winter Blues" series were mostly people who "subscribe" to one or more of the OSU Extension Live Healthy Live Well (LHLW) Team's health promotion sites. The LHLW team has a Facebook page where daily posts are made related to various health and wellness topics, as well as a blog where posts are made twice weekly. People who "subscribe" to these sites may also participate in the semi-annual LHLW email wellness challenges. These challenges run for six to eight weeks and offer twice-weekly emails on various wellness topics. Again, one could conclude that participants in this series already had an interest in practices that may improve health and, therefore, were more willing to embrace the information.

Although participants in these webinar series may have already had a vested interest in health and wellness, the success of these series demonstrates that by leveraging existing wellness initiatives, Extension Educators can increase their reach with timely and relevant programming. Participants in the “Staying Calm and Well” series found the information about SAD and the pandemic blues useful for coping with current circumstances. By collaborating with the CWO, educators were able to reach an audience that may not have otherwise participated in Extension programs. Thus, this webinar series provided the opportunity to “showcase” unique Extension programming for a non-traditional audience.

While already familiar with Extension, many participants in the “Beating the Winter Blues” series still learned new information and indicated they were planning to use the information presented. In this series, packaging familiar content in a novel way reached clientele in a timely and relevant manner. The series described in this article are examples of how Extension professionals are bringing the resources of the university to their audiences and responding to critical needs during one of the most challenging times in recent history.

1 Active Polls

1. How does winter affect you?



You may click here to access the references, tables, and graphs for this article.



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Appendix

Table 1

Evaluation results from the “Stay Calm and Well” series

Session Title	# of attendees	# of evaluations received	% who can use the information presented to cope with current circumstances	% who plan to use the information presented on a regular basis	% who believe the information will help them
Overview Session	1,257	1,165	93	90	91
Beat the Blues with Exercise	1,074	1,061	95	91	93
Beat the Blues by Unplugging	1,173	962	93	92	93
Beat the Blues with Humor	932	923	88	85	85
Beat the Blues through Connection	804	758	93	91	92

Table 2

Evaluation results from the "Beating the Winter Blues" series

Session Title	# of attendees	# of evaluations received	% who learned new information	% who plan to use the information
Overview Session	83	22	86	77
Beat the Blues with Exercise	64	15	93	100
Beat the Blues by Unplugging	61	16	94	81
Beat the Blues with Humor	58	19	100	79