

The Challenge of Confining Conditions

The holidays are finally over. Your student is off to campus. The car is weighed down with gifts, clean laundry and special treats. You may be wondering, "What will happen between now and Spring Break?" This span of time is not that much different from any other in the academic year, but it can be one of the most difficult. Whether your student is a freshman or a "Super Senior" the gray of winter in West Michigan can bring about special challenges for students.

If you live in the Midwest, you may be familiar with the term "cabin fever." It is used to describe a claustrophobic reaction when people (especially groups of people) are shut in to a small space with limited things to do. In this electronic era, we don't think about winter as feeling confining to students. Remember, they haven't live in a world without computers, over 200 channels on television, cell phones, and instant messaging. To a student, these are all normal necessities of life. Symptoms of cabin fever include restlessness, irritability, forgetfulness, excessive sleeping and distrust of others. Encourage your student to seek a new environment from time to time: join a club or organization that will introduce them to different students, explore the surrounding community, or go to an area library to study.

A more severe reaction known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is recognized by both the American Medical Association and the American Psychiatric Association. SAD is triggered by the onset of fall or winter and is characterized by the following:

- Feeling sad or depressed
- Lack of energy, activity and/or enthusiasm
- Difficulty concentrating
- Carbohydrate or sugar cravings (often leading to weight gain)
- Sleep disturbances
- Reduced productivity
- Irritability

It is difficult to be a student and be dealing with these challenging symptoms. During the winter daylight is shorter or nonexistent, therefore less light passes through the eyes. This inhibits the release of the very important brain chemical serotonin and increases the release of melatonin. This imbalance creates the depressive symptoms stated above.

So, what can a student do about SAD?

- **Light helps.** Encourage your student to get outside or sit near a window. If symptoms are severe they can consider replacing the light bulb in their study lamp with a full spectrum light bulb. These are available at most retail (i.e. Meijer) and hardware stores. More than light is needed to keep depression from knocking at the door

during the winter.

- **Use relaxation techniques to reduce stress.** Simple deep breathing exercises can erase stress. Breathing deeply through the nose, enough to inflate the abdomen, and exhale through the mouth for about eight seconds and repeat three to five times, goes a long way toward stress reduction.
- **Maintain contact with family and friends.** Meaningful relationships are a source of comfort. Encourage them to stop looking at the walls and change the view with people who care for them.
- **Exercise regularly.** 30 minutes of exercise three days a week can be an effective means to combat depressive symptoms.
- **Make an appointment at Career and Counseling Services.** Counseling can be an additional source of support for your student to sort out what is going on.

In the middle of a time that is at best uninspiring and at worst intensely depressing, we have Valentine's Day. Yikes! Your role in your student's life is very important. Even if they are in a romantic relationship, there is something significant about being honored by your parents as a young man or woman.

Lastly, it is during this time that your student is being asked to make some big decisions. Declare a major, choose next semester's classes, decide on what to do for spring break, apply for a study abroad program, graduate school, or that first professional job. These decisions can feel overwhelming. Students often feel as if they are deciding on the course of the rest of their life. That's a lot of pressure. When your student comes to you to talk about these decisions, take a deep breath, listen and help them to sort out the pros and cons of their decision.

The light at the end of the tunnel is - spring **will** come!