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# Along The Way

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# Investing in Your Own Obituary

by Dr. Bill Webster

I recently attended a funeral where several people delivered a eulogy, paying respect to the person whose life we were there to honour. We heard some meaningful tributes, together with several funny stories of things that had happened and significant incidents where the person had “come through” for others. At the end of the service, we all felt thankful we had known this individual and grateful for the difference he had made in each of our lives.

At the reception that followed, someone remarked to me, “I hope that when I am gone, the people who speak at my funeral will have nice things like that to say about me.” I made some comment like, “Yes, wouldn’t we all” ... but it got me thinking.

I wonder what people would say about me at my funeral? Maybe the whole idea seems a bit eerie, morbid or even weird. Possibly that is because our culture doesn’t handle the idea of death very well ... especially our own!

What kind of husband, father or grandfather would I want to be remembered as by my family? How would my chums characterize how good a friend I had been? What would professional colleagues or clients say about my character, or how would some-

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one from the community see my achievements or contribution to making the world a better place?

Stop and think about how you would like to be remembered on that day.

# I n M E M M O R Y

*Isn't it strange how, after someone dies, there is an irresistible urge to elevate them to sainthood. Maybe it is because we learned long ago that you should "never think ill of the dead."*

Myself, I would hope that it would be kind, but at the same time realistic. I remember being at a funeral where people were praising the deceased with glowing stories of how wonderful and picture-perfect they were. After the second speaker, I had the irresistible urge to look at the bulletin to make sure I was at the right funeral because this seemingly unflawed person they were describing was not the person I had known! Oh, he was a great guy right enough, but he was far from perfect ... and we all knew it.

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But personally I don't like these kinds of eulogies, because they are unrealistic. In fact, what I identify with and appreciate more in people is their "humanity" ... and part of being human is that none of us is without fault. The important thing to remember is that we loved them anyway, in spite of their human flaws and failings. That was who they were, and we should acknowledge that as part of the life they lived.

But think about this: what would you like people to say about you at your funeral?

I have come to realize that every single day we all invest in our own eulogy. If I want people to say generous albeit truthful things about me on that day, what am I doing each and every day now to earn those words that people will want to speak?

If I want my spouse to say that I was kind, faithful, thoughtful and loving as a partner, what have I done lately to invest in those

words being spoken? They are earned by everyday actions: bringing flowers, making tea, doing little things to let her know I love her. It's not just the big things like exotic trips or expensive gifts (I hope she reads this). Love is earned in the little things of life; in the simple everyday actions that say how much you care.

I would be very satisfied if my boys and my grandchildren felt able to say that I played a central role in their development as well-rounded human beings. That isn't something you can cram into the last six months of life. That has to be a committed, daily series of attitudes and actions.

I would like to think that colleagues could reflect on characteristics like integrity, honesty, enthusiasm and diligence. I am by no means perfect, but I do like to treat people the way I would like to be treated. I had to make significant changes in my younger days to invest in those characteristics becoming foremost in my life. That too has to become a "habit" of action and attitude. It doesn't just happen.

What we are really saying here is, "What do I want to get out of life?" We each find our own answer by visualizing what we would want people to say about us at our celebration of life, because that enables us to identify our priorities and what is really important in life. Every day, we invest in our own eulogy.

So think about the words you would like each of the speakers at your funeral to say. What is really important to you in life? Very few at the end of their life say "Gee, I wish I had spent more time at the office." Most would rather reflect on the time they invested in people who mattered, how they spent themselves in a worthy cause, or how they tried to make their world a better place by their efforts, small or large.

Years of living without a focus on how you want to be remembered may tempt you to believe you can't do it, or that it is too late. But you would be mistaken. As Lao Tzu once said, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

All you need to do is to evaluate what is most important to you, and then implement the actions and attitudes that will help you move towards how you want to be remembered.

As George Eliot – the famous novelist – reassuringly reminds us: "It is never too late to be what you might have been."

Go on. I dare you!





# When You're Feeling Sad and Blue

by Dr. Bill Webster

"It's that time of the year again."

What a silly statement with which to begin! Every day, if you think about it, can be described as "that time of the year."

But somehow the cold months of January and February seem to be a particularly difficult point in the calendar for many people. I read that the most depressing day of the year is actually January 24, because it is when the Christmas season credit card bill comes in ... usually depressingly high! And we often carry that over into the next month when many experience "the February blues."

The syndrome is known as seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, and is a type of depression related to changes in seasons. More recently it has been described as "depression with a seasonal pattern."

For a lot of people, this SAD experience is very real. It seems to be related to the amount of sunlight exposure. That explains why SAD begins and ends at about the same times every year, for most people their symptoms starting around December and continuing into the winter months.

What are the indicators of SAD? People with the syndrome often feel tired and lethargic; they may seem withdrawn to family, friends and colleagues; they may have less interest in activities they usually enjoy. Other symptoms may include:

- Irritability
- Tiredness or low energy
- Feeling depressed most of the day, nearly every day
- Feeling hopeless or worthless

- Losing interest in activities once enjoyed
- Having problems with sleeping or oversleeping
- Having difficulty concentrating
- Problems getting along with other people
- Appetite changes, especially craving foods high in carbohydrates
- Weight gain

While the exact cause of SAD is unknown, researchers believe the condition may be related to the body's internal clock, which regulates temperature and hormone production. Nerve centres in the brain control our daily moods and rhythms, and are stimulated by the amount of light that enters our eyes. During the night or in periods of reduced light (such as occurs in winter), the brain produces a hormone called melatonin, and SAD may be related to these increased levels of melatonin in the body.

Accordingly, on dull winter days, people with the condition may have difficulty waking up, or may feel drowsy or "down" during the day. Interestingly, in Alaska, where there is very little daylight during the winter, over 10 per cent of the population suffers from SAD.

There are several forms of therapies available to help people with SAD. In this article, I am simply bringing some recent research to the forefront to encourage those experiencing such symptoms to seek qualified professional help.

Light therapy has become recognized as an important tool against SAD. Research has demonstrated how daily exposure to bright light (phototherapy) may help balance

certain brain chemicals and reset body rhythms. Usually, light therapy involves sitting in front of a "light box" with a high-intensity fluorescent light source meant to simulate daylight. The therapy is not without some problems, however, and may cause side-effects including eye strain, headaches, nausea and agitation, which again highlights the importance of checking with an appropriately qualified medical practitioner.

In the field of counselling, cognitive therapy can help people learn about their SAD condition, discover ways to manage their symptoms and prevent recurring episodes of depression. One of my "life lessons" in counselling has been the realization that there is a "reason for every reaction." We need to understand the why behind the behaviour before rushing to find the how to alleviate the symptoms. Reactions never happen in a vacuum. So we must ask why this person is displaying SAD symptoms. Sometimes, encouraging family participation in the counselling can be helpful, not just to learn how to cope with a loved one's behaviours, but to understand the reasons behind them.

So, if you are affected by SAD, or even just feeling "down" this time of the year, here are some things that can help.

### **Daily exercise**

Regular physical activity helps fight both fatigue and depression, especially if you exercise during the day or near light sources. Keep in mind that outdoor light, even when the sky is overcast, is often brighter than light boxes, so an hour spent outside during the day can help ease symptoms of SAD and prevent episodes of depression. Find an outdoor hobby you can enjoy throughout the winter months such as skating, skiing or walking.

### **Seek the sun**

Try to get outside as often as possible especially during the cold winter months. Even weak sunlight and light reflected off snow can increase your exposure to light and help ease symptoms of SAD. Arrange your home or office to maximize your exposure to light. Open blinds; sit closer to bright sunlit windows for reading, eating or working while at home or in the office.

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### **Take a holiday**

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### **Be aware of your moods**

Self-awareness can alleviate some of the feelings of distress during these seasons. Be aware of your moods and energy level and attempt to maintain perspective. Remember above all that SAD is not your fault ... it is a condition that can be treated.

### **You are not alone**

SAD is still not fully understood, but if you are experiencing feelings that are greater than mild depression, do not be afraid to ask for help. Talk to your friends, your family and your doctor who will support you. Using your support network can help decrease those feelings of isolation or sadness.

I love this quote by Albert Camus:

"In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger, something better, pushing right back."

Hang in! Spring is on the way.

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