



## Brighter Days!

By Greg Lilly, Editor

As the holidays fade and the winter's gray light dampens the mood, some people develop a seasonal depression. "It's called Major Depressive Disorder, Seasonal Pattern. It's a specific type of depression largely tied to loss of daylight," Dr. Susanna Owens explains. "It's correlated with hunkering down, staying inside, eating more, withdrawing socially and feeling blah. It tends to happen between the time changes."

She explains this seasonal depression can be treated with bright light therapy. "Also, if you can, get outside and take a walk in the daylight." While any type of depression needs professional help to catch it early and to apply effective treatment, Dr. Owens says there are things that can be done as preventative measures, once the person is aware of the

depression.

The term depression can include a multitude of concerns. "I would call it depressions, plural," she says. "There are a number of different kinds of depressions. It's easier to define by someone's symptoms: feeling low, sad, down, most of the day on a majority of days, on-going thoughts of death or hopelessness. In some cases, people have trouble with sleep and concentration, fatigue and irritability."

What our parents called the "blues" are common. "We're not static in our emotions. We all have good days and bad days, good hours and bad hours. That's normal. When it becomes a diagnosable illness is when it becomes unrelenting, when it significantly impacts the quality of your life, when you're unable to enjoy the pleasant things in life that you used to enjoy." The loss of quality of life is a key to seeking help.

"It's normal to be sad," she stresses. "We live in a culture that says we should be happy all the time, which isn't healthy. Depression is when it impacts your functioning. It can be mild, moderate or severe. It can be diagnosable like a major depressive disorder or bi-polar disorder or the seasonal pattern that tends to hit people in the winter after the holidays."

Dr. Owens explains that when a person doesn't feel like themselves or they hear from family, friends and neighbors that they're not behaving as usual, maybe sleeping more or demonstrating irritability, then it may be depression.

"I refer to anxiety and depression as the 'evil twin sisters' because they often go together," she says. "Sometimes people, especially after the holidays, are experiencing an anxiety disorder, but they aren't sure that's what it is. They're often on-edge, they can't hold their thoughts together, their muscles ache and they feel cranky or have headaches. Usually if a person is depressed and it goes untreated, anxiety tends to develop with it. They often occur together."

Dr. Owens uses the bio-psycho-social approach to identifying a cause of the depression. "There is usually a biological component to it, maybe genetic or chemical. There's a psychological component in the way someone is thinking or the expectations for themselves play a role in making them feel worse. Social or environmental aspects also impact a person."

The personal aspect of psychology attracted Dr. Owens to the field when she was in school. "Actually, this is my second career," she says. "My first was as a professional ballet dancer with the Richmond Ballet. When that career was coming to an end due to an injury, I thought about what I wanted to do. Some of my favorite times were talking to other people. Psychology allowed me to do that as a career."

She had grown up in Richmond and earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees in psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). After her injury that ended her ballet career, she returned to VCU for her doctorate in Counseling Psychology.

"I really like people. I'm an introvert, so I'm better with one-on-one and small group interactions. I've always found people interesting. I like to get to know people. I'm curious about people. Psychology is this beautiful blend of the art and science of understanding people. There is an art to being with people and helping people, but it can be so much more powerfully informed by science. For me, psychology was a great fit."

She stresses that while some self-help practices can be used as preventative measures, a professional diagnosis and plan lead toward a cure. "We know that anxiety and depression are treatable. We know that peo-