Supporting the whole family's mental health during winter

By Brandi McFerran

As days get shorter and temperatures fall, many people have a hard time feeling their best during the winter months. Taking proactive and consistent steps throughout every week can help stave off the winter blues and cabin fever.

With such limited daylight, it is important to have some outside time with the sun, daily if possible. Getting morning light helps reset the brain's internal clock and promotes a good sleep cycle. Keep windows unblinded during the day to let light into the house. Consider a Vitamin D supplement (consult your provider) for kids and adults to promote healthy maintenance during the dark winter months when we don't get as much sun.

Routinely go for walks outside. Gather the family for a communal walk by bundling up and getting out, even if it's dark outside. Fresh air, conversation, exercise and time away from screens is natural medicine.

Build in movement indoors when possible to promote daily exercise. Even light workouts boost serotonin and endorphins that can improve our mood for up to hours at a time. Kids and grownups need to move, especially when cooped up during the cold months. Our bodies crave different physical input and movement. Activities like building a fort, making a homemade obstacle course, a dance party, communal cleaning or chores party, yoga, and games like Twister can help promote some indoor fun and movement.

Keep some planned activities on the calendar to look forward to as a family, rather than relying on motivation or spontaneity. Predictability reduces anxiety and regulates emotions.

Consider keeping a winter craft table with puzzles, crochet, diamond art, Lego, or other simple crafts to promote positive relaxation, fun and to soothe anxiety.

Prioritize regular balanced meals with protein, fiber and colorful veggies. Invite kids and teens to participate in making meals. Blood sugar dips can mimic low mood and cause meltdowns or tantrums.

Bring in warm and bright lights in the early evenings to avoid the "it's already dark" feeling by keeping it bright inside until it is time to wind down for bed.

Maintain good sleep hygiene by putting away screens an hour before bed (especially phones and tablets), keeping a consistent bedtime and wake-up time and dimming the lights before bed.

When to call a professional

Seasonal Affective Disorder is more than feeling low and is a form of depression. If you or someone in the home is struggling beyond the "winter blues" and experiencing unmanageable symptoms like

significant withdrawal and isolation, unable to keep up with routines and activities, struggling to find joy, feelings of hopelessness, insomnia or oversleeping, and/or suicidal thoughts, consider professional support instead of selfcare advice. Your primary care or medical provider is a good place to start if you are unsure how to access mental health support.

*If you or someone you know are in a mental health crisis, call or text the Montana Crisis Lifeline at 988. It is free and staffed 24 hours by trained crisis responders who answer every call and text message. More resources are available online at **RiverStoneHealth.org/suicide-prevention**.*

Brandi McFerran, LCSW, is the lead pediatric behavioral health provider at RiverStone Health Clinics, which integrate behavioral health and primary care. Schedule an appointment with a clinic provider online at RiverStoneHealth.org/Appointments or call 406-247-3350.