Beating The Winter Blues

By Rikki Trageton

As the snow piles up and the temperatures drop, it is common for people living in the upper Midwest to begin experiencing symptoms of mild depression: lack of energy, loss of interest in activities, and fatigue. Most people can fight those "winter blues" by following some simple suggestions and being patient while we wait for spring. If you find yourself experiencing the “winter blues” try the following suggestions:

• Get regular exercise. Exercise reduces stress, increases energy, boosts metabolism, and overall makes us feel better. Even if you can’t join a gym, you can still exercise. Take the stairs, park far away from the door when you go shopping, go for a stroll at the local mall, turn cleaning into a workout, or use an exercise DVD at home.

• Eat a healthy diet. “You are what you eat.” What and when you eat affects your mood and energy. Stay away from processed food and stick with fresh fruit, vegetables, and whole grains. Make sure to drink at least 8 glasses of water a day. Healthy foods help to stabilize your blood sugar and energy level.

• Get some sun. Sunlight provides us with vitamin D. Lack of vitamin D affects mood and can lead to depression in some people. We need to go outside even in the winter. Put on proper clothing and go outside for short periods of time.

• Get social support. Never underestimate the power of time with friends and family as a way to fight the blues.

• Relax. Take time for yourself to do something you enjoy: read, meditate, take a yoga class, or learn a new hobby.

• Embrace the season. Instead of complaining about the cold and snow look for fun things to do in it. Have you ever tried cross country skiing, ice skating, snowboarding, or sledding? You won’t know if you like it until you try it!

• Avoid binge drinking. Coping with depression by drinking is never a good idea. Alcohol is a depressant and will make symptoms worse.

• Treat yourself. Plan something fun so you have something to look forward to. This will help keep you motivated and give you something to work toward.

• Act on your New Year’s resolutions. If you set New Year’s resolutions for yourself, take action now. Don’t put off until tomorrow what you can accomplish today. If you begin to work toward your goals, you will have a sense of accomplishment and you will feel better about yourself.

• Get regular sleep. Too much or too little sleep can affect mood. Adults need 7-8 hours of sleep a night. Try to keep a regular sleep schedule, go to bed and get up at a similar time each day. Too much sleep can actually make you feel tired.

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Peer Mentor Spotlight

By Bobbi Mundt

This issue’s mentor spotlight is on Allen Colemer. The Colemer Family has been involved with Freedom since 2001, when we worked to install a TTY, a telecommunications device for the deaf, for Allen and Julie’s son, Matt. As we got to know this family better, we learned their unbelievable story.

Allen and Julie, along with their children Hannah and Matt, were involved in a serious car accident on Christmas Eve in 1999 when their car was struck head-on. Allen’s injuries were life-threatening, breaking both legs in several places and having multiple other serious injuries. Julie experienced internal injuries, which have continued to cause her problems. Hannah damaged her spinal cord at L1-2, meaning she is now a paraplegic and uses a wheelchair for mobility. Matt was the only family member who was not injured in the accident, but was deaf prior to the accident. When help arrived, they took the kids and Julie first, leaving Allen exposed to the freezing temperatures. He lost parts of several fingers due to frostbite.

The reason we chose to highlight Allen Colemer is far more than to tell you about this accident. Allen and Julie are providers. They work to ensure their family is stable, and their futures are bright. Even after this accident, Allen kept returning to work. He had over twenty surgeries on his leg, but was never able to stay home long enough to heal. He was denied Social Security Disability because he kept returning to work. After their savings were depleted to keep health insurance, Social Security was finally approved at the Administrative Law Judge level. Allen was able to heal and get Medicare. Eventually had the leg amputated. In 2008, Allen was in another car accident, which caused him to be in a coma for several weeks. The fact he survived this accident is nothing short of a miracle.

This family is an incredible example of persistence. They are a cornerstone in their community and beyond. They raise awareness and sensitivity for people with disabilities. They do the real outreach. Allen talks with people to see if he can help in any way. He refers people to Freedom Resource Center frequently. Allen is a member of Freedom’s Board of Directors, and he volunteers at the Sargent County Museum. He enjoys mentoring in a variety of areas, including adjustment to a disability, parenting with a disability, employment, and attitudinal barriers.

Statistically, this type of trauma would have torn a family apart. But, it seems that just the opposite has happened. They are all busy, working, going to school, attending sports, visiting with friends, and other activities – most importantly, they are happy. This is an example of real mentoring. Living the life…independently.
By Nate Aalgaard, Executive Director

Picking Our Battles

As I write this, we have just rescheduled our board meeting for the fourth time. Three times the weather has done us in, and once it was illness. Is it frustrating? You bet it is. But it is also not really under my control. I cannot win a battle against the weather. I have to accept that cancelling a meeting is a whole lot more manageable than dealing with a bunch of board members slipping and sliding around on a dark, cold night and perhaps ending up in the ditch. So we move on and try another day.

We can see the battles in the United States Congress play out on TV, the Internet, and newspapers on a daily basis. So now that there is not another election for two years, it seems they can finally get down to business and accomplish something. It was stunning recently to see the Congress actually passing a number of bills in the very same week! It feels like they are usually much more interested in getting elected than in conducting the people's business to move this country forward.

Legislatures in Minnesota and North Dakota are getting together to battle over policies and funding for various programs. Some of the issues will be of great importance to us as people with disabilities. Everyone who cares about things like healthcare, education, transportation, housing, and civil rights should pay attention. We don’t have time or resources to weigh in on every single issue, but some are definitely worth the battle. At Freedom, we have position papers that cover many different aspects of life for people with disabilities. When we do surveys of our consumers, which we recently did, certain issues continue to rise to the top.

Our current consumers gave us wonderful input for our telephone satisfaction surveys. Issues that rose to the top most often were: access to transportation, employment opportunities, access to adequate health care, accessibility to buildings, and frustration with navigating complicated systems such as Social Security.

Another big theme was negative attitudes and discrimination. Don’t a lot of the other problems stem from a basic belief that people with disabilities have less value than other people? If those type of attitudes didn’t exist, would we have to worry about people getting fired because they have a disability, or being denied access to services because they didn’t quite understand the process? Would there be more tolerance and understanding for people who acted a little bit differently? Would services and accessibility improve because we get more respect?

One issue that has taken center stage in our region and across the country recently is bullying. Kids get bullied for all types of different things, but one of them certainly is disability. We have talked to kids who’ve had it happen to them. We have tried to work with them and their parents to get school systems to take it seriously and put a stop to it. We want to work with other interested groups for good, enforceable legislation to prevent this serious abuse.

There are a lot of battles that we as people with disabilities can choose to fight. I think the one about negative attitudes and discrimination is the key. There are times when we need to go the formal complaint or legal route. We also need to concentrate on getting out in public, networking and collaborating, and being involved in different aspects of society. That way people get to know us and recognize our skills and abilities rather than just relying on some preconceived negative impression.

So here’s what I think we need to work on: First, ensure that people with disabilities are valued and respected when they access services from both the public and private sector. Second, work toward creating meaningful employment opportunities at competitive wages. And finally, ensure civil rights protection for people with disabilities in all aspects of life, paying particular attention to education at this critical point when bullying has become such a prevalent issue.

From Where I Sit

Check us out on Facebook and Twitter
Board Member Spotlight
By: Angie Bosch

Freedom would like to introduce Julie Carlson who has been a board member since 2009. Julie is a former employee of Freedom where she was a Peer Mentoring Specialist from 2004-2006. When the opportunity presented itself to become a board member Julie was excited, stating, “I feel like discrimination toward the disability community is a battle worth fighting and I feel proud to play a role in it.”

Julie lives in Fergus Falls. She is a K-12 school counselor in Battle Lake and Underwood, Minnesota. She attended St. Cloud State University and received a bachelor’s degree in Community Psychology. Immediately following, Julie enrolled as a graduate student at NDSU in Counseling where she received her master’s in School Counseling. The role of a school counselor is to meet the personal, academic, and career needs of students. “I love my job, but it is very demanding. I do everything from consoling the kindergarten student who misses mom to assisting seniors in enrolling in college and everything between.” Julie said.

A North Dakota native, Julie grew up on a farm in a family of six outside Wyndmere. She is married to Erick Carlson and has a nine-month-old boy named Odin. They spend a lot of time in the Otter Tail Lake area where both of their parents have cabins on surrounding lakes.

Julie commented, “Being a board member for Freedom challenges me to live its mission day to day.” As a school counselor she often has to advocate for her students. Some of her favorite moments as a counselor have been teaching self advocacy skills to students and watching them go out into the world feeling ready for what comes at them. Freedom would like to thank Julie for her dedication in advancing our vision.

Upcoming Events

March 29-30 Transition Conference
April 15 County Transition Interagency Committee fundraiser
April 28 Assistive Technology Expo
May 4 Project Connect

These events are open to the public. Contact us for further information.
National attention has been brought to an issue every one of us has experienced in our lives, bullying. Whether we were bullied, did the bullying, or witnessed a classmate get bullied, we all have that negative experience to reflect on from time to time. With the onset of new technologies and social media, bullying has taken on a new form. Now, instead of the message being shared amongst a small group of individuals in a localized setting, it can be shared with hundreds of people around the globe in a matter of a few clicks.

Unfortunately, it has taken the lives of many young individuals, both locally and across the country, to draw attention to this long-standing problem. No more should we brush it aside and say, “It’s just kids being kids.” We’ve begun to realize that actions do indeed have consequences at all ages of life whether intended or not.

Minnesota currently has a bullying law in place. Its effectiveness has been an issue for debate. However, now it is time for North Dakota to rise to the occasion. Many coalitions of both individual activists and organizations have formed across the state to produce legislation that will be brought to the floor during the 2011 legislative session. A notable proposal has come from the Attorney General’s Office.

While many proposals head to committee in the legislature, we want to remind our officials that bullying in our schools is sometimes directed at children with impairments simply because, on occasion, they act or look different. Freedom’s staff has listened to many young individuals talk about their experiences with bullying and it tugs at a person’s heart to say the least. As a result, we are working so that any bill that gets to the floor of the legislature will include protections for children with disabilities as we work toward community education and systems change.
Although winter can be cold and dreary for those of us who live in the upper Midwest and we often would rather stay indoors, we know it is important to stay active.

While we know it is beneficial for everyone to lead active lives, those with disabilities especially benefit. People with disabilities who are sedentary often struggle with their weight, which can put added stress on their joints and complicate necessary medical procedures. Try to get yourself and your family outdoors and active this winter. Here are several sports you may want to try:

Sled hockey: Sled hockey, which is a descendant of original ice hockey, was invented more than 40 years ago by two men in a rehab hospital in Stockholm, Sweden. The men modified a metal-frame sled with two regulation hockey skate blades, which allowed the puck to pass beneath the sled.

Skiing: Up until the 1970s, amputees and people with visual impairments were the only people with disabilities who could ski. With the introduction of the monoski (sit ski) and the bi-ski, the sport opened up to paraplegics, quadriplegics and double amputees. Some adaptations include the use of outriggers, brightly colored ski guides and audible cues for blind or visually impaired skiers. There are two types of adaptive skiing: alpine and nordic. Alpine skiing is similar to downhill skiing while Nordic is similar to cross-country.

Snowmobiling: Snowmobiling also is a wonderful way to enjoy the outdoors during winter. A snowmobile has hand controls that are similar to a wheelchair’s and the combination of no foot controls make it a very attractive option to those with mobility impairments.

Fitness centers: If outdoor activities in the winter months are not your favorite choice, there are fitness centers that allow for indoor activity. For example, the Courage Center has a fitness center designed for people with physical disabilities. There is state-of-the-art fitness equipment that could be adapted for people with a variety of disabilities. Check with your local fitness center to see what kinds of equipment or services they have available for those with physical disabilities.

However you choose to get your exercise in the wintertime, find something that is fun for you and your friends and will chase away the winter doldrums. There are many options out there.

A new year is upon us, a year in which new state legislatures will take the reins of governing. As we look at the upcoming legislative agendas for the states of Minnesota and North Dakota, we must take into consideration the economic realities of the two. The disparity will show a contrast in what services each state is able to provide their residents in the years to come.

**Minnesota**

It was revealed that Minnesota will have a $6.2 billion deficit in their upcoming biennium. Part of this debt is due to the transfer of financial responsibility from the federal government to the state. Federal stimulus money is not available due to a lack of Congressional support in 2010. Without the federal aid, Minnesota will bear more responsibility in funding services, which may hinder its ability to maintain current rates.

In December I attended a legislative forum hosted by the Minnesota Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities. It focused on how the state’s budget outlook will impact services used by the elderly and individuals with disabilities. Representative Abeler, the new chairman of the House Health and Human Services Finance Committee, was present and stated he does not see any additional tax revenues coming to the state. Without additional tax revenue, a cut to spending will occur to balance the budget, meaning a cut to vital services. As of this writing, it has not been determined where these cuts will come from.

On January 5, Governor Dayton, through executive order, made sweeping changes to the Medicaid system available in Minnesota. Through the federal Affordable Care Act, states are allowed to expand coverage with federal assistance. It is estimated that 95,000 low income Minnesotans will now be eligible for Medicaid coverage within the year.

The services rendered as a result of a legislature’s actions have the potential to save lives, and cutting vital services may have the adverse effect. The reality in Minnesota is that the legislature is looking to find a way to do more with less. We need to voice our concerns and make it apparent that the state must not take action that will harm the most vulnerable among us.

**North Dakota**

Projections of a large budget surplus have many across the nation shouting praise unto the state. However, there is much work needed to be done. Talk of infrastructure improvements in the oil patch counties of the western part of the state, to flood control in Devils Lake and the Red River Valley, has brought focus to geographic necessities. Yet, we must not lose focus on other services necessary for our citizens.

Money Follows the Person (MFP) is a program funded through Medicaid, administered by the state, which allows individuals who qualify a choice to stay out of the nursing home and receive home and community based care. State funding has historically been imbalanced, giving institutional based care a large advantage for resources. This imbalance leaves individuals little choice on where they can live to receive care. We believe individuals have a right to choose where they live and will continue to pursue a more balanced approach to keep people out of the nursing home if they wish to stay in their communities.

In the long term, MFP is projected to save the state money by reducing the expenditure of Medicaid used for nursing home services, which studies indicate are more expensive than home and community based care. This would provide opportunities to either lower taxes or pursue other services desired by the state’s constituency.

Freedom has a commitment to attain systems change to work toward equality and inclusion for people with disabilities. We see a future where there is not institutionalized discrimination, tearing people away from the choice of where to live and how to receive necessary services. We cannot achieve that change alone. We ask for everyone to become active, to apply a collective voice to bend the political discourse in your favor.

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According to the American Community Survey, in 2009 the unemployment rate for people with disabilities was 65.7% in Minnesota relative to 63.4% in North Dakota.
The Mission of Freedom Resource Center for Independent Living is to work toward equality and inclusion for people with disabilities through programs of empowerment, community education and systems change.

We envision a society where ALL individuals are valued, respected and have equal opportunity, access, responsibility, and freedom of choice in all aspects of life.