

Still no cure or explanation for those summertime blues

Hong Kong, June 10 (DPA) If you woke up this morning feeling down in the dumps, you're most probably not alone. It could be you're experiencing something even the experts have struggled to fathom - the summertime blues.

But for some, those blues go beyond a simple bad mood or unexplainable sadness, sinking them deeper into real depression and even suicidal thoughts.

Figures from countries all over the northern hemisphere show May and June to be the peak months for suicides with around 10 percent to 14 percent more people taking their lives in Hong Kong during these months than any other time in the year.

By contrast, the low season is December to January which experts attribute to the fact that Christmas followed quickly by the Chinese New Year festival keeps people's spirits up and helps them stay connected with loved ones.

In the southern hemisphere, the peak occurs around November to December, again the early summer months.

It's a phenomenon which has puzzled scientists specialising in the fields of the human brain and psychology for years: given that the dark dim days of winter are more associated with a deterioration in mood, wouldn't it make more sense for suicides to peak then?

According to Dr Paul Yip Siu-fai, director of the Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention, at the University of Hong Kong, May and June have long been the most miserable months in Hong Kong.

'It could be a seasonal effect, the change of the weather. It is very humid and very moody. Some people suggest it is the change from spring to summer which people prone to depression are more receptive.'

This is a theory borne out by a survey in 2005 in Finland which suggested changes in the light and temperatures disturb the human body clock which, in turn leads to suicide attempts as seasons change.

Likewise, in 2005 researchers in Britain deduced the climate could be to blame for the seasonal rise in May.

The Priory Group, a provider of acute mental health services in Europe, said although the increased level of sunlight helped combat depression by producing serotonin - known as the feel good chemical - in the brain, it also brings a burst of energy compelling people to take action.

In the case of the severely depressed, this new found energy could be the stimulus they need to put suicidal thoughts into action, the researchers claim.

'It is a harsh irony that the partial remission which most depression sufferers experience in the spring often provides the boost of energy required for executing a suicide plan,' said Professor Chris Thompson, the group's director of healthcare services.

'Spring is a time for new beginnings and new life, yet the juxtaposition between a literally blooming world and the barren inner life of the clinically depressed is often too much for them to bear,' he said at the time the research was published.

The weather theory would also explain why equatorial regions show very little or no such seasonal peaks.

A study published in 2001 by the School of Psychiatry at the University of New South Wales in Sydney examined suicide data from Singapore covering 1989 to 1998 and concluded that any variation was random rather than seasonal.

There are also signs that the seasons may be playing a less significant role on our moods regardless of where we live, says Dr Yip who has published papers on this very subject.

In recent years, countries which have long recorded summertime peaks are seeing the peak become less noticeable. In some countries it has almost disappeared. Why?

Modern life appears to be smoothing out the peaks and creating a situation where we are less likely to feel any more depressed in the early summer than at other times of the year, according to Dr Yip.

The good news in the modern world is despite all these increased year-round pressures, better communication channels mean we are less likely to feel alone.

And the suicide rate is decreasing in places like Hong Kong since reaching a peak of 1,200 in 2003 at the time of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome outbreak. Last year, it stood at just under 1,000 people or 13.5 suicides per 100,000 people.

But still there is no denying May and June remain the most miserable.

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