

Seasonal Affective Disorder is More Than “Winter Blues”

By: Jean Holthaus, LISW, LMSW



Awakening to another gray, cold, snowy day gives many Midwesterners the urge to pull the covers up over their head and hibernate until April. However, for about 6 of every 100 people, this slightly glum feeling gives way to Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

SAD is a form of depression typically affecting people in the autumn and winter and then dissipating during the spring and summer. While the exact causes for SAD are unknown, it appears to be connected to the way decreases in sunlight affects the body's circadian rhythms and the fact the brain's production of serotonin (a neurotransmitter affecting mood) decreases during the winter months.

All forms of depression, including SAD, are painful and serious. It is important to recognize the symptoms, seek treatment and resist the urge to believe things will never get better. Contact a primary care physician or counselor if you are concerned that either you or someone you know is struggling with SAD.

The Symptoms of SAD

SAD was first identified as an illness by the [National Institute of Mental Health](#) in 1984 and is a form of depression causing those affected to experience:

1. Changes in Mood.

Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, depressed and/or irritable mood, increased anxiety, feelings of emptiness, feelings of guilt, increased sensitivity to criticism, and increased tearfulness.

2. Changes in Energy.

Wanting to sleep more than usual, not feeling rested even when sleeping more, less energy to do things, less interest in doing things that are normally enjoyable, decreased sex drive, and difficulty concentrating on and completing tasks.

3. Changes in Eating.

Increased appetite and increased cravings for simple carbohydrates (sugary, comfort foods).

4. Changes in Social Interactions.

Loss of interest in friends, spending less time with friends and participated in social activities, and increased isolating behavior.

These symptoms usually worsen gradually over time, making it is easy to adopt an “It’s not that bad” or “I can tough it out” stance instead of seeking treatment. Unfortunately, without treatment, SAD symptoms often do not improve and can worsen to the point where individuals may struggle with thoughts of harming themselves. That’s why it is so important to get help if you are struggling with symptoms of SAD and to seek help IMMEDIATELY if you or someone you know is struggling with thoughts of harming themselves.

The first step, seek medical attention!



Tiredness, fatigue and low energy are symptoms of SAD, as well as symptoms of other medical conditions including hypothyroidism, hypoglycemia and mononucleosis. Primary Care Providers will run tests to help determine an accurate diagnosis and will also help to determine appropriate treatment options.

SAD is often effectively treated through using a light box between 30 and 90 minutes each day. This treatment is effective in 60 to 90 percent of cases with very few, if any, side effects. The light utilized must be appropriate for the treatment of SAD and protect against UV (tanning beds should not be used to treat SAD symptoms). Fifty percent of people do not respond adequately to light therapy alone and may need medication and/or counseling to help manage their symptoms.

Antidepressants help regulate the neurotransmitters in the brain while counseling focuses on helping to change and manage the negative thoughts and feelings associated with depression.

Daily habits will either feed or help fight SAD.

Staying active and
getting outside can
boost mood and energy!



In addition to seeking

professional assistance, individuals struggling with SAD need to fight against rather than feeding their illness. SAD moves people toward isolation and inactivity. To combat the illness, it is important to “act opposite of the emotion” by doing things to create community and stay active. It is important to reach out and receive encouragement from family and friends.

Stay active.

Research has shown that 20-30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise each day is effective in treating depression.

Get outside.

Spending more time outside during daylight hours also helps to naturally balance circadian rhythms.

Eat healthy

Simple carbohydrates full of sugar and caffeine may sound appealing, but eating healthy meals containing lean protein, whole grains, fruits and vegetables helps the body to stay in balance.

Limit alcohol intake.

Alcohol is a depressant so it is important to limit your alcohol intake, even though it may seem like it would help to deal with the negative feelings.

Get a good night's rest.

Going to bed and getting up at about the same time each day and being sure to sleep for at least eight hours each night is essential for treating SAD.

Have faith.

Research shows deep connection to faith and spirituality can also help in both the prevention and treatment of depression so talking with your priest/pastor/spiritual mentor may be helpful.



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