

Category: Mental Health

Metatag: Seasonal affective disorder; Depression

Seasonal Affective Disorder (S.A.D.)

Winter Blues ... Cabin Fever ... Winter Doldrums ... Holiday Depression... Winter Depression... Many different names are used to describe this disorder of depression that worsens in the winter months. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) usually begins in late autumn and/or early winter and goes away in the summer months.

Although SAD can affect anyone, especially those living in northern latitudes, young people and women are at the highest risk. Doctors estimate that 10% of the population suffers from the more severe form of the disorder, while an estimated 20% of the population suffers from a milder form of SAD called subsyndromal SAD or 'winter blues.'

The symptoms of SAD are:

- ☞☞depression that begins in fall, peaks in winter and wanes again in spring;
- ☞☞lack of energy;
- ☞☞increased need for sleep;
- ☞☞craving for carbohydrates and junk food;
- ☞☞weight gain;
- ☞☞diminished sex drive;
- ☞☞problems concentrating;
- ☞☞withdrawal from family and friends;
- ☞☞joint pain or stomach problems;
- ☞☞heavy feeling in arms and legs; and,
- ☞☞feelings of increased energy come spring.

There are ways to cope with the symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder. The following are strategies from Norman E. Rosenthal, M.D., SAD pioneer and researcher:

- ☞☞Keep your home and workspace bright. Avoid heavy drapes and dark colors. Consider installing skylights.
- ☞☞Go outside year round. Take walks at lunchtime.
- ☞☞Have lunch outdoors or next to a window.
- ☞☞Eat sensibly and exercise. You'll gain less weight and feel better.
- ☞☞Take vacations to sunny places during your "worst" months, usually December through February. Anticipation may help you endure the time beforehand.
- ☞☞Join or start a local SAD support group.
- ☞☞Accept your condition as an illness, not a character flaw.

There is various treatment options available, including photo therapy or light therapy. Sufferers can sit in front of a light box that emits a very bright light through a filter, for a certain period of time each day. Other treatment options include counseling or antidepressant medications.

For additional information on SAD, visit the following sites:

Seasonal affective disorders (SAD) – Canadian Network for Mood and Anxiety Treatments
<http://www.canmat.org/depress/nine/depress.html>

Seasonal affective disorder – Canadian Mental Health Association
<http://www.cmha.ca/english/sad/main.htm>

Frequently Asked Questions about Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) - UBC Mood Disorders Centre
<http://www.psychiatry.ubc.ca/mood/sad/>

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