Seasonal Affective Disorder: What It Is and How to Cope

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What Is Seasonal Affective Disorder?

With contributions from Eric P.

When days get darker and colder, it's natural to feel a bit under the weather. However, for up to 20 percent of the population, those feelings are much more broad, severe and difficult to ignore.

The condition goes by a few names —seasonal affective disorder (SAD), seasonal depression, winter depression — but the effects are the same. Lethargy, excessive sleeping, dulled emotions, anxiety, and appetite changes are among the biggest complaints, and they can last from the beginning of fall until the spring.

Instead of succumbing to the gloomy effects of SAD for months on end, take some steps to treat the discomforts. First, figure out what's at the root of your issue, then work with your doctor and the tools at your disposal to lift your mood and restore your energy.

Is It Seasonal Affective Disorder or Something Else?

SAD is not really that different from other major forms of depression, except for the pattern it takes. The symptoms hit rather suddenly once autumn turns to winter (or even earlier), and it tends to affect people in places with less winter light.

Some people are more prone to developing SAD. There are a few factors that raise your risk, including:

- Where you live (more cases of SAD occur in higher latitudes)
- Gender (60 to 90 percent of SAD sufferers are women)
- Age (SAD normally begins after age 20, but your risk declines as you get older)

The main difference between SAD and other forms of clinical depression is that SAD symptoms will wane in the spring. Other major depressive disorders are chronic, and the onset of symptoms is generally a lot less predictable.

Although certain traits define SAD, this sort of depression can manifest in different ways. Some people may feel mostly lethargic and fatigued, while others might have a wider variety of symptoms, from trouble waking up to trouble concentrating and a sadness that's difficult to shake. Physical problems, like digestive issues or headaches, are not uncommon.

There is a spectrum of severity, and it's important to address your particular symptoms rather than compare them to a master list of criteria.

Seasonal Affective Disorder Vs. With Seasonal Pattern

You may hear people say, “there is no such thing as seasonal affective disorder,” and depending on their knowledge, they might be correct. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) created and maintain a text which lists all current psychological conditions and disorders as well as their symptoms. This book does not include seasonal affective disorder.

Instead, this source of information notes “with seasonal pattern” as a specific type of depression and bipolar disorder. So, you can have major depressive disorder with seasonal pattern or bipolar disorder with seasonal pattern, but you cannot have seasonal affective disorder under the current APA guidelines.

If someone suggests that you or your loved one has SAD, you may want to gather more information about the specific condition to which they are referring. They could be misinformed, confused, or downright wrong about their view of the condition.

Remember that proper diagnosis usually results in better treatments. Seek out the informed opinion of mental health professionals who use the most up-to-date information.

Criteria for Seasonal Pattern

You might hear people talking about SAD in very general ways with vague symptoms like feeling depressed in the winter and changing energy levels when the seasons shift, but the with seasonal pattern specifier for depression and bipolar disorders have rigid demands that must be met to qualify for the condition. To have the seasonal pattern for depression, one must:

- Display significant worsening in mood and depression consistently in the fall and winter
- Display significant improvement in mood and depression consistently in the spring and summer
- Show depressive episodes only match the season for the last two years. So, if you had depression in the summer last year, you will not qualify for the seasonal pattern specifier.
- Have the majority of lifetime depressive episodes during the fall and winter. It’s acceptable if during your teen years depression happened during all seasons, but most depression throughout your life must be during in the winter.

The criteria for the seasonal pattern with bipolar disorder is similar with the main difference being the possibility of manic or hypomanic episodes, marked by high energy and poor sleep, during the spring and summer months.

It’s also important to account for other factors that influence seasonal mood issues. If someone is usually laid off in the winter, has less money, and higher stress, it would make sense for him to have higher depression during this time of year. It is problematic, but probably not related to depression with a seasonal pattern because of the outside influence.

The same is also true if the fall and winter are linked to negative events or anniversaries like traumas or family member deaths. In these situations, feeling more depressed during these times is quite normal and expected, not a seasonal pattern.

These issues can be very significant to the person experiencing the symptoms, and they may require professional treatment.

Next page: What causes seasonal affective disorder? And ways to manage seasonal affective disorder symptoms.

What Causes Seasonal Affective Disorder?

Although it’s difficult to pinpoint just what pushes some people into this seasonal depression, experts believe a few elements are involved, including:

- Brain chemicals
- Ions in the air
- Genetics
- A shift in your circadian rhythm
- Increase in melatonin

Whichever processes have triggered your case of SAD, one thing is clear: the amount of light you get has a huge impact on your symptoms. As the days get shorter and the mornings stay darker for longer, you will probably notice your symptoms getting worse, and you might have a very hard time improving your mood throughout the day.

How to Beat Seasonal Affective Disorder

You might feel helpless in the face of the cruel, cold winter, but there are a few ways to combat the uneasiness and depression it brings. The best solution will likely involve light, activity, social support, and of course, consultation with your doctor.

Get the Right Light

Getting more light into your day is a simple and effective solution, but you need the right *kind* of light. Simply sitting in a brightly lit room probably won't do the trick; using a special light box that delivers an abundance of UV rays will make a much bigger difference.

White light therapy is the traditional approach to treating SAD, but newer blue light therapy seems to have an equally positive effect. Both conventional tube bulbs and LED lights can be used, but whichever device you decide on, it's crucial you get the high quality of light you need.

There are plenty of SAD light manufacturers out there, and some aren't medically supported. Do your research and check with your doctor whether the brand is reputable before you make your purchase.

Time Light Therapy Properly

Experts generally agree that the most important time to get light is in the morning. After all, the rising sun naturally rouses your body and mind, resetting your internal clock and lifting your mood. Mood and energy can get a lot worse when you're waking up before dawn.

However, like many conditions, there's no one-size-fits-all cure for SAD. Everyone experiences the symptoms a bit differently, and everyone has their own circadian rhythm and sleep habits.

If you're naturally late to bed and late to rise, getting a dose of bright light too early in the morning could make your SAD symptoms worse. Consider your own habits and personality when you treat your SAD.

Watch Your Diet

As the weather and seasons change, people shift their food intake. On chilly fall and winter days, people might be more interested in meals that are heartier and more comforting. Plus, there is the desire carried over from your ancestors to add a few pounds when the weather turns to survive the harsh winters when food was scarce.

These normal diet changes can have a big impact on your mood, especially if you are susceptible to the effects of weather changes. It turns out, your diet changes could combine with the seasons to make your mood, energy level, and optimism all sink in the winter.

To neutralize the impact, you should stick to a healthy, fresh diet no matter the time of year. Plan your meals to include a balanced mix of proteins, whole foods, and plenty of veggies to feed your body and your brain the nutrition it really needs.

Next page: More ways to cope with seasonal affective disorder and next steps.

Up Your Activity

Like your diet, your activity level takes a dive during the fall and winter. As the season change brings cooler temperatures, people are less interested in heading to the outdoors, which results in more time inside and sedentary.

This shift hurt in two ways. First, being inside more means there is less opportunity to get the available natural light. Second, being inside reduces the amount of physical activity and exercise you receive.

There is plenty of evidence to show exercise is a natural mood booster. Whether it is from the surge of wanted chemicals induced by exercise or simply heating up the body, activity makes people feel better.

No one is saying that you can exercise yourself through depression with a seasonal pattern, but when combined with other available treatments, you might find improved symptoms that are less intense and less frequent than with no activity.

Whatever physical activity you choose, please stay patient with yourself and those around you. Exercise is always a helpful tool, but it takes time to get the results you seek.

Talk it Out

Light, a healthy diet, and exercise are all natural, drug-free treatments for SAD – so is talk therapy. Meeting with a therapist is a low-risk way to address your symptoms and change your experience.

Therapists often assess your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to better understand your stressors and supports. From there, your therapist can offer simple modifications to the way you think or the behaviors you do to create lasting changes in your life.

Perhaps the best thing about therapy is its availability. Nearly every community has mental health centers available to the residents, and in the 21st century, talk therapy is available through numerous online sources.

Therapy can improve the negative impact of depression on your life, and it can improve many other aspects of your overall well-being. If you have a problem, therapy could be the answer.

Consider Medication

If the other forms therapy aren't working well for you, it may be worth talking to your doctor about adding an antidepressant medication to your treatment plan. Prescription drugs like Paxil and Prozac have been shown to improve depression symptoms, and may be what you need to get your perspective and energy back on track.

However, it's important to be cautious when it comes to medication for depression. Although these drugs aim to balance important brain chemicals, they might not be the ideal solution for seasonal depression since it stems from different causes than clinical depression.

Hopefully, you can find success from medications, and if you do, you and your prescriber can arrange a plan where you stop your medications in the spring and restart in the late summer before your depression has a chance to build.

Try Ion Therapy

A very new (but promising) SAD therapy uses negatively-charged ions to relieve the symptoms. It's still a mysterious approach — in fact, the positive results were an accidental discovery — but experts have high hopes

that flooding the body with painless negative ions could bring a lot of relief to a lot of sufferers.

Whichever SAD therapy you use, don’t discount the importance of a strong support system. Emotional states are strongly tied to physical states, so keeping your activity level high, socializing on a regular basis, and staying in physical contact with family and friends can help your mood and perspective more than you might imagine.

When to See a Doctor for Seasonal Affective Disorder

If you’ve tried to get more light into your life, and adjusted your daily habits and medication to no avail, you may be dealing with something more serious than winter depression. Since there appears to be a genetic component to SAD, doctors suspect sufferers may also be genetically predisposed to chronic clinical depression, which could interfere with your life year-round.

Not everyone with the SAD symptom set will experience chronic depression, but it is worth paying attention to changes that could signal a worsening problem. If your weight changes by more than 5 percent, you lose interest in your favorite activities, or you begin to have suicidal thoughts, don’t sit back and wait for the spring to make things better. See your doctor right away to investigate your seasonal depression more deeply.