

Do you get the Winter Blues? Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)



Traci B. Hawkins, MA LLP

Do you find yourself feeling “blue” in the winter? If you suffer from symptoms of depression during the winter months that subside during the spring and summer, you may have Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). SAD is a mood disorder associated with episodes of depression that are related to seasonal variations of light.

As seasons change, there is a shift in our “biological internal clocks” partly due to changes in sunlight patterns. Usually, the most difficult months for SAD sufferers are January and February, which is ironic since this is when we need the energy and positive mood to tackle our annual New Years Resolutions. Young people and women are at a higher risk and it affects 10% of people who live in northern climates.

The symptoms of SAD include:

- 1) Regularly occurring symptoms of depression (excessive eating and sleeping, weight gain, depressed mood, irritability, lack of motivation and energy) during the fall or winter months.
- 2) Full remission from depression occurs in the spring and summer months.
- 3) Seasonal episodes substantially outnumber non-seasonal depression episodes.
- 4) A craving for sugary and/or starchy foods.

Possible Cause:

The sleep related hormone, Melatonin, which is secreted by the pineal gland in the brain, has been linked to SAD. This hormone is produced at increased levels in the dark and it may cause symptoms of depression. Therefore, when the days are shorter and darker the production of this hormone increases.

Treatments:

Bright light therapy, or phototherapy, has been shown to suppress the brain's secretion of Melatonin. Although research has not found a definite link with this therapy and an antidepressant effect, many people do respond positively to it. For mild symptoms, spending time outdoors during the day may help. An hour's walk in winter sunlight was shown to be as effective as 2 ½ hours under bright artificial light in one study. Antidepressant drug therapy and counseling can also prove effective in reducing SAD symptoms. Research has shown that cognitive psychotherapy does help relieve depression faster and more completely. If you feel you may be suffering from SAD, contact your family doctor and/or mental health professional.

Traci Breniser Hawkins, MA LLP
Clear Reflections Psychotherapy, PLLC
517. 414. 0065
Email: TraciHawkins@TraciHawkins.com