

Coping with Seasonal Affective Disorder

Seasonal affective disorder is a type of depression that is related to the change of the seasons. Approximately 5% of Americans report suffering from seasonal affective disorder (SAD), which lasts about 40% of the year with varying levels of severity.

For those affected with SAD, it normally begins and ends at the same time each year. Most commonly symptoms of SAD begin in the fall and persist through the winter until spring or early summer, but can also develop in summer months.

The exact cause of SAD is unknown, but it is thought to derive from the reduction in sunlight during colder months, which can cause a change to your body's circadian rhythm, serotonin levels and/or melatonin levels, all of which regulate sleep, appetite and mood.

Symptoms of SAD

The following are some of the symptoms of seasonal affective disorder:

- Feeling depressed most of the day, daily
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Low energy
- Losing interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Having trouble sleeping
- Experiencing changes with appetite or weight
- Feeling agitated or sluggish
- Having difficulty concentrating
- Having frequent thoughts of death or suicide

What can you do to cope with SAD?

People that live in areas that have a colder and longer winter generally prepare for winter in many different ways, such as winterizing a vehicle, cleaning fall leaves from the front yard and bringing winter clothes out of storage. Research shows that being prepared for winter both physically and mentally can help reduce symptoms of SAD. Here are some ideas that have been proven to help cope with SAD:

- **Let the sunlight in:** Opening the curtains or shades on windows, especially in the morning, is a great way to naturally wake up and boost energy levels. Maximizing exposure to natural light will also boost mood.
- **Maintain your routines:** It is important to keep up with your everyday activities. Once daylight savings occurs, which reduces the hours of daylight each day, it can become easy to neglect some of your

regular routines and activities. For instance, make sure you are still going to your weekly book club, basketball game or dinner out with friends.

- **Focus on exercise:** Exercise releases endorphins which can make you feel happy. Research has shown that exercise is comparable to therapy or antidepressants in its effectiveness in treating depression. Exercise can be done at your home with or without equipment, in a fitness center or outside. It is recommended to engage in some form of exercise most days of the week.
- **Reduce sugar:** Not only does excess sugar promote weight gain and increase risk for diabetes and certain cancers, but research has shown that there is a connection between sugar intake and depression. Research shows that countries that consume the most sugar have the highest rates of depression. Sugar will provide a temporary energy boost, but in the end will leave you feeling sluggish and can increase anxiety.
- **Get outdoors:** Spending time outside and breathing fresh air can help lift spirits and relieve stress. Going outside for a morning walk can have multiple benefits by exposing you to natural light and helping you get exercise. Make sure to bundle up and wear layers to keep warm.
- **Look for new wintertime hobbies:** Winter can be an opportune time to develop a new passion such as cross-country skiing, downhill skiing, ice skating or snow shoeing. You can also look to the winter to focus on other indoor hobbies like starting a new cooking, art, music or exercise class.
- **Learn new relaxation techniques:** Learning and practicing new relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation or progressive relaxation have been shown to change neural networks and reduce stress. Deep breathing exercises have also shown to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety.
- **Plan a trip:** Taking a trip to a warmer climate during the cold winter months is not always an option. However, if you have the opportunity to travel, a trip can provide a much needed mental break from work and give you a chance to enjoy some extra sunshine.

Resources

- Familydoctor.org, a service of the American Academy of Family Physicians: www.familydoctor.org/condition/seasonal-affective-disorder
- MedlinePlus, a service of the National Institutes of Health: www.medlineplus.gov/seasonalaffectedisorder.html
- National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/seasonal-affective-disorder/index.shtml

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