

Could Your Symptoms Be Seasonal Affective Disorder? **By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Sad? Bone-weary? Can't get enough potato chips, pasta or sweets? Not wanting to get up in the morning? Got the blues? Would you be surprised if someone said that you are depressed? Have you felt like this before during the winter only to find you feel better when the sun comes back out in the spring/summer? It might be Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). Sometimes the symptoms are mild; sometimes they are debilitating.

If you have this pattern that tends to occur during the fall and winter months, only to have the symptoms go away of their own accord in the spring and summer, it could be SAD. Most people that get SAD have normal mood the rest of the year. Some say their symptoms just seem to spring out of nowhere and others say that they began to feel this way gradually and that they kept getting worse.

The symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder vary among people. Those symptoms can include sadness, depressed mood, fatigue/low energy/lethargy, loss of interests, craving of carbohydrates, weight gain, social isolation and withdrawal. Other symptoms might include decreased sexual interest, and hopelessness. In extreme cases suicidal thoughts could be present and require immediate attention. The symptoms of depression can be mild to severe.

Where does SAD come from? Most sources link SAD to a general lack of sunlight in winter which affects brain chemistry and a person's biological clock or circadian rhythms, which puts them out of step with their own daily routine or schedule. Most sources believe that January and February are the most difficult times for SAD sufferers. It has also been suggested that some people are more pre-disposed to Seasonal Affective Disorder than others.

How can it be treated? If you are having these symptoms, it is appropriate to seek an accurate diagnosis for your symptoms, then help to reduce those symptoms. Most respected sources agree that increased exposure to sunlight can reduce the symptoms of SAD. So, you can look at your schedule and daily routine and figure out how you can maximize your exposure to sunlight on a daily basis. You could go for one hour walks daily. You might make sure that you let the sunshine into your home or office and move your furniture around so that you spend time in that sunlight. There is also "light therapy" that your doctor might recommend with an appropriate diagnosis of SAD. It has also been suggested to put your bedroom light on a timer where it will come on before you want to awaken. This could be helpful in one of your symptoms is difficulty awakening in the morning. Other options might include psychotherapy and/or antidepressants, especially SSRIs. Daily exercise and a balanced diet wouldn't hurt. Proactive problem solving, including being aware of and planning for lowered energy levels, can help reduce your stress and thus help manage your depression and other SAD symptoms.

Psychotherapy, especially cognitive therapy, is helpful. One of the ways that cognitive therapy helps is in challenging the negative triad of depression. These negative

thoughts about self, the world, and the future, might tell you that you have always felt this way, deserve to feel this way, and will always feel this way. If you know that you have SAD, you can challenge those cognitive distortions with the reality that it is a real illness, that you didn't feel this way before the fall/winter, and that you will be feeling better by the spring/summer. Being aware of your symptoms and taking steps to take care of yourself is the first step in feeling better. There is no good reason to wait until you feel worse. Take action now and feel better soon.

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