

SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

What Is Seasonal Affective Disorder?

Many of us are familiar with the “winter blues” as we plod through the darkness of winter feeling tired, craving carbs and not wanting to get out of bed. We gain a little weight, dream of a beach vacation and move on successfully with our lives with little to no consequence.

Some people, however, experience a heightened form of these symptoms. Their depression and lack of energy becomes debilitating, causing their work and relationships to suffer. As fall turns to winter, their symptoms strike; the onset of spring brings relief. This condition is known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), a type of depression related to seasonal changes in light.

Possible Cause Of SAD

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

Treatment

Bright light therapy has been shown to suppress the brain’s secretion of Melatonin and, according to the National Mental Health Association, many people respond to this treatment. Light therapy consists of sitting in front of a specially designed light box or lamp, usually in the morning, allowing the light to shine directly through the eyes. The individual can carry out normal activities such as reading, eating breakfast, etc while using the light. For those who prefer not to sit still during the 30 minutes to 2 hours required for light therapy, the light visor is an option. These light devices cost about \$250 to \$500 and are at least 10 times the intensity of ordinary domestic lighting.

Other Treatments

For mild symptoms of SAD, spending time outdoors during the day or arranging homes and workplaces to receive more sunlight may be helpful. Outdoor light, even when the sky is overcast, provides as much or more light than a light box.

Antidepressants have been shown to be effective in reducing SAD symptoms.

Daily exercise has also been shown to be helpful, particularly when it is done outdoors.

Psychotherapy and any complementary therapies which help the individual to relax, accept their illness and cope with its limitations may be extremely useful.

For More Information

Contact the EAP at 410/328-5860 or

National Mental Health Association

<http://www.nmha.org>

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