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Feeling SAD – When Seasonal Changes Give You the Blues

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There are many people who wonder why they feel different when the seasons change, especially when the sunny summer months turn to cloudy, cold and dark days. Moods change, and people complain of feeling tired, weak and downright sad. So often this begins when there are fewer hours of daylight. When the days are shorter, our circadian rhythms tend to get all out of sync. There are those who show signs of depression and talk about feeling the blues and blahs. Family members will recognize the mood changes, and so will friends and coworkers. They go to work with less energy and when they get home, they want to disengage, sleep and eat more. There is a name for this change in behavior. It's called "Seasonal Affective Disorder" or SAD. Yes, it is called SAD (the acronym says a lot), because those who suffer from SAD seem to be sadder during the fall and winter months. This disorder can cause distress for those who have lots of energy all spring and summer and who love to be outdoors doing stuff all the time. Their activities come to a screeching halt when the skies begin to darken earlier replacing the daylight. Employees suffering from SAD may be harder to work with during this time, because they appear more negative and pessimistic.

Here are some of the symptoms:

- Sleep problems – wanting to sleep more than usual, and when you do get sleep, it seems like it's never enough.
- Feelings of hopelessness – whatever is bothering you, it now seems like it's never going to get better.
- Guilt increases – even if the guilt is regarding something from a long time ago.
- Thoughts of death and suicide – this is in extreme cases.
- Fatigue and low energy – no desire to do the activities or exercise that gets you through the spring and summer months.
- Feeling depressed – this can range from every day to a few days per week.
- Not being able to concentrate – memory problems that are noticeable.
- Overeating – many gain weight. There can be an increase in craving carbohydrates.
- Substance abuse may increase – nothing else to do but stay inside and feel sorry for themselves. Alcohol abuse becomes the coping tool for staying indoors and being bored.
- Social withdraw – not making plans and continually saying "no" when invited somewhere.

Most of these symptoms are due to biological and hormonal changes. When sunlight is decreased, it disrupts a person's internal clock, which leads to feeling depressed or sad. A brain chemical produced in our bodies called serotonin impacts our mood and depression level. When serotonin levels plummet, people get SAD.



Serotonin is one of the most important chemicals when it comes to suffering from and treating depression. Then, there is melatonin. It is also important when it comes to SAD. The balance of melatonin is crucial in our sleep patterns. We need it to get a good night's sleep.

Melatonin is normally produced by the sun, and if the sun isn't shining on us, the production of it decreases. This can contribute to lack of sleep, which can be a factor in depression.

The good news is there are things that can be done to fight off SAD. If you or someone you know suffers from SAD, you should first see a doctor to make sure that the change in behavior is due to the changes in our fall and winter months, and not something more serious (although this disorder can be serious for some).

Here are some tips to prevent and manage SAD:

- Keep your routine. When it gets dark earlier, many people stop their hobbies that helped them handle their stress during the spring and summer months. Keep doing what you usually do.
- Do not hibernate. Keep going to social events (sporting events, parties, etc.) with family and friends.
- Keep exercising. Do not change your exercise program. Whatever it is, do not stop. Research suggests that getting involved in an exercise program can have the same effect as an anti-depressant. It can help you feel happier.
- Watch your nutrition. If you are inclined to eat more, because it is dreary outside, it can increase your depression. Sugar intake is the worst. Craving sweet and/or starchy food gives you a false sense of energy, because shortly after you eat these foods, you feel tired and sluggish. During the fall and winter months, it is better to eat more protein and fiber.
- Try to relax. Practicing "mindfulness" can reduce stress, along with yoga and meditation. Practice it all year round but

more so in the fall and winter months. All of the above can fight off depression caused by SAD.

- Change your interests. If you have all types of spring and summer sports you like to participate in, decide to try some fall and winter ones.

There are many that can help with your mood, even though it is cold and dark. The sports you play may change, but being a fan of a sports team doesn't have to.

- Go on a trip. Since one of the causes of SAD is the lack of sunshine, go ahead and go south or to a place in the world that will provide you with lots of sun. It will help your mood and help control Seasonal Affective Disorder. Going on vacation is necessary for our mental health and planning one to get you away from the "blues" is always beneficial.

- Buy a light box. A light box (or light therapy box) mimics outdoor light. You can buy a light box that helps increase the



melatonin produced in your system, so you can sleep. It's best to use them in the morning when you don't want to be sleepy. Bright light in the mornings helps keep your 24-hour cycle of light and dark synchronized. Based on research, these boxes are an effective treatment for those who suffer from SAD.

There are some clinicians who are trained in "light therapy" and can help guide you on how to use your light box.

Many people living in sunny Southern California and other areas known for their sunshine suffer from SAD. We tend to get used to the sun being out, and when it's not, we tend to feel down. That's a normal reaction most of us have, but when it starts to create problems in our work, social and family life,

it has crossed a line and has become Seasonal Affective Disorder. If you think you might be experiencing SAD, give The Counseling Team International a call, so we can shed some LIGHT on how you're feeling.

Be safe,
Dr. Nancy



AOCDS, in partnership with The Counseling Team International (TCTI), offers the below listed professional licensed and confidential services to members of the AOCDS Medical Trust, at no additional cost. Please visit TCTI's website at <http://thecounselingteam.com> for details.

**Counseling services can be obtained 24 hours a day,
365 days a year by calling 1-844-655-1035.**

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