



SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a form of depression with symptoms that usually occur during the winter months, usually going into remission during the spring and summer. Although it was first noted before 1845, it has only received wide public attention in the last decade or so. One in seven depressed persons experience SAD. This disorder usually begins in early adulthood, and affects four times as many women as men. For most people with SAD, January and February are the worst months.

Causes

It has long been known that sunlight, as it peaks and ebbs over the year, affects many animals' seasonal activities, such as hibernation or reproductive cycles. Apparently humans are no exception.

Researchers have tied SAD to melatonin, a sleep-related hormone the human pineal gland produces and releases in the dark. Production of the hormone seems particularly active during winter, when the days are shorter and darker.

Symptoms

The symptoms for SAD are specific to avoid misdiagnosis for other depressive disorders:

- Regularly occurring symptoms of depression (sad, anxious, or 'empty', decreased energy and interest, etc.) during the fall/winter months of at least three different years – two years consequently.
- At least three times as many instances of depression within a two-month time frame as during other times of the year
- No other factors to account for regular changes of mood (e.g. seasonal unemployment).

When To Seek Medical Advice

These symptoms are indications that you should have the situation checked out by a qualified professional.

1. Your functioning is impaired to a significant degree, for example, you should seek help if you develop problems at work, including:
 - Difficulty getting to work on time on a regular basis
 - Marked reduction in your ability to think and concentrate
 - Difficulty completing tasks you could previously manage

2. Problems occur in your personal life, for example, you may feel you want to be left alone and withdraw significantly which can cause difficulties with friends and family.
3. You experience significant feelings of depression. These may include:
 - Regularly feeling sad or having crying spells
 - Feeling that life is not worthwhile or wishing you would not wake up in the morning
 - Thinking negative thought about yourself (e.g. you are a bad person, incompetent)
 - Feeling guilty much of the time
 - Feeling pessimistic about the future
4. Your physical functions are markedly disturbed during the winter. For example:
 - You require several more hours of sleep per day, or have great difficulty waking up in the morning
 - You just want to lie around for much of the day
 - You feel you have no control over your eating and weight

Treatment

Phototherapy (light treatment) has been effective in relieving SAD. Patients sit three feet away from a full-spectrum florescent light (about 12 times brighter than ordinary room light) and asked to glance at it about once a minute. The only side effects are occasional eyestrain and headaches.

Things to Do to Help Someone Suffering from SAD

1. Understand the problem. Recognize that this is a real problem even though the person affected looks normal.
2. Just be there. Don't feel you have to do anything specific, your presence and company will be experienced as soothing and helpful.
3. Encourage the person with SAD. Remind the person this is a passing phase, that he or she has not always felt this way and will feel better again.
4. Help with simple things. Even doing shopping can feel like a huge chore to the depressed person. Offers to help out will be greatly appreciated.

Things to Avoid

1. Don't judge and criticize. The person with SAD is already feeling bad about not functioning up to his or her normal standards, and about letting everyone down.
2. Don't take the person's withdrawal personally. Do not assume the person is mad at you or uninterested in being friends with you.
3. Don't assume that it is your responsibility to make the person feel fine. It is not likely to work, and you will probably end up feeling frustrated and irritated at your failure.

Funding provided by:

