

Tips to Help with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

By the GWAAR Legal Services Team (for reprint)

If you start feeling down during this time of year, you are not alone. Also known as the “winter blues” Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD affects millions of people during the winter months in the northern hemisphere. This year may be especially difficult for people with SAD when added to the social isolation of COVID-19. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is not considered as a separate disorder but is a type of depression that has a recurring seasonal pattern. Seasonal Affective Disorder includes all the symptoms of major depression such as:

- Feeling depressed for prolonged periods
- Feeling hopeless or worthless
- Having low energy
- Losing interest in activities you once enjoyed,
- Having problems with sleep
- Experiencing changes in your appetite or weight
- Feeling sluggish or agitated
- Having difficulty concentrating
- Having frequent thoughts of death or suicide

Additionally, symptoms of SAD that recurs in wintertime includes:

- Having low energy
- Hypersomnia
- Overeating
- Weight gain
- Craving for carbohydrates
- Social withdrawal (feel like “hibernating”)

So, if you’re feeling this way around this time every year and if it’s especially difficult this year, what can you do feel better? First, talk to your doctor. According to NIMH, there are four major types of treatment for SAD that may be used alone or in combination with each other that your doctor may recommend: medication, light therapy, psychotherapy, and vitamin D.

Medication

Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) are used to treat SAD. The FDA has also approved the use of bupropion, another type of antidepressant, for treating SAD. As with other medications, there are side effects to SSRIs. These medications can only be prescribed by a doctor so you will want to discuss risks and benefits of different medications with your doctor.

Light Therapy

Your doctor may also recommend light therapy. Light therapy has been a mainstay of treatment for SAD since the 1980s. The idea behind light therapy is to replace the diminished sunshine of the fall and winter months using daily exposure to bright, artificial light. Symptoms of SAD may be relieved by sitting in front of a light box first thing in the morning, on a daily basis from the early fall until spring. Most typically, light boxes filter out the ultraviolet rays and require 20-60 minutes of exposure to 10,000 lux of cool-white fluorescent light, an amount that is about 20 times greater than ordinary indoor lighting. These therapy lights, sometimes called “happy lights” or “happy lamps” can be purchased at many retailers. For more information and help selecting the light therapy box read this article from the Mayo Clinic.

Psychotherapy

Your doctor may also recommend psychotherapy to help with SAD. According to NIMH, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is type of psychotherapy that is effective for SAD. Traditional cognitive behavioral therapy has been adapted for use with SAD (CBT-SAD). CBT-SAD relies on basic techniques of CBT such as identifying negative thoughts and replacing them with more positive thoughts along with a technique called behavioral activation. Behavioral activation seeks to help the person identify activities that are engaging and pleasurable, whether indoors or outdoors, to improve coping with winter.

Vitamin D

Finally, your doctor may recommend taking a vitamin D supplement. According to NIMH, at present, vitamin D supplementation by itself is not regarded as an effective SAD treatment. The reason behind its use is that low blood levels of vitamin D were found in people with SAD. The low levels are usually due to insufficient dietary intake or insufficient exposure to sunshine. However, the evidence for its use has been mixed. While some studies suggest vitamin D supplementation may be as effective as light therapy, others found vitamin D had no effect. For more information visit:

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/seasonal-affectivedisorder/index.shtml>