

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Identifying Seasonal Affective Disorder

Most people are as excited about winter's arrival as they are about getting a root canal. In only a few months, we go from basking in the sun, to battling snow, slush and near darkness. For many this can mean a case of the "winter blahs," but for others, it means dealing with the more sever symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

Why Does It Happen?

While researchers haven't completely pinned down the reasons for SAD, they believe winter's long nights are a major contributor. We use sunlight to maintain our circadian rhythms, the internal clock that regulates mood and feelings.

When it's sunny outside, the brain releases serotonin, a chemical which wakes the body up and is linked to positive emotions. At night, on the other hand, the brain gets a surge of melatonin, causing a drowsy sensation. Because the nights are much longer in wintertime, the brain usually produces less serotonin. For those afflicted with SAD, the amount of serotonin becomes drastically lower, resulting in feelings of depression.

Who Gets It?

Since darkness is a major factor in the illness, it's no surprise that the number of SAD cases increases the further north you go. Overall, between two and three per cent of the general population suffers from full-blown SAD, while an estimated 15 per cent to 20 per cent of the population experience the 'winter blues' or mood changes associated with SAD. Scientists haven't found any cultural or ethnic group more likely to have the disorder, but women are four times more likely than men to suffer from the illness.

SAD Myths

SAD is the same as the "winter blues." While the "winter blues" often share characteristics with SAD, SAD is actually a form of clinical depression. Symptoms are far more severe and can include strong feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness, severe insomnia and suicidal thoughts or behaviors.

SAD tends to creep up slowly, increasing as fall progresses into winter, and the days become shorter. As spring approaches, the symptoms lessen very quickly.

Signs of SAD

Most SAD sufferers have similar symptoms:

- Feeling uninterested in doing things that used to be fun
- Craving foods with starch (like potatoes and bread), and eating more of everything
- Gaining weight
- Suffering from joint or stomach problems
- Having trouble getting up in the morning and feeling tired and/or slowed down much of the time
- Lowered sexual desire and function
- Trouble concentrating
- For women, worsened premenstrual syndrome symptoms

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At its worst, SAD can lead to serious depression and even suicide. If you, or someone you care about is affected by SAD, seek out the advice of a health care professional.