



key

*Unlocking
Solutions
To Everyday
Problems*



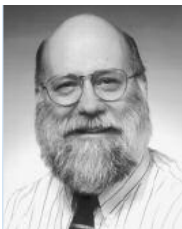
Winter 2011

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EAP COORDINATOR'S CORNER

As the daylight gradually increases and we start to come out of the dark days of winter it is good to remember that getting out into the sunlight can mean more than just fresh air. Some of us may suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder. One of the "keys" to good health both body and mind is sunlight.



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Shedding Some Light on Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Throughout the centuries, poets have described a sense of sadness, loss and lethargy which can accompany the shortening days of fall and winter. Many cultures and religions have winter festivals associated with candles or fire. Many of us notice tiredness, a bit of weight gain, difficulty getting out of bed and bouts of "the blues" as fall turns to winter.

However some people experience an exaggerated form of these symptoms. Their depression and lack of energy become debilitating. Work and relationships suffer. This condition, known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) may affect over 10 million Americans while the milder, "Winter Blues" may affect a larger number of individuals.

What is SAD?

SAD is a form of depression that appears at the same time each year. With SAD, a person typically has symptoms of depression and unexplained fatigue as winter approaches and daylight hours become shorter. When spring returns and days become longer again, people with SAD experience relief from their symptoms, returning to their usual mood and energy level.

What Causes SAD

The specific cause of seasonal affective disorder remains unknown. It is likely, as with many mental health conditions, that genetics, age and perhaps most importantly, your body's chemical makeup all play a role in developing the condition. A few specific factors that may come into play include:



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- **Your biological clock (circadian rhythm).** The reduced level of sunlight in fall and winter may disrupt your body's internal clock, which lets you know when you should sleep or be awake. This disruption of your circadian rhythm may lead to feelings of depression.
- **Melatonin levels.** The change in season can disrupt the balance of the natural hormone melatonin, which plays a role in sleep patterns and mood. Talk to your doctor to see whether taking melatonin supplements is a good option.
- **Serotonin levels.** A drop in serotonin, a brain chemical (neurotransmitter) that affects mood, might play a role in seasonal affective disorder. Reduced sunlight can cause a drop in serotonin, perhaps leading to depression.

What are the Symptoms of SAD

Someone with SAD will show several particular changes from the way he or she normally feels and acts. These changes occur in a predictable seasonal pattern. The symptoms of SAD are the same as symptoms of depression, and a person with SAD may notice several or all of these symptoms:

- Loss of energy
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Increased desire for sleep, including daytime sleepiness
- Headaches
- Episodes of crying
- Loss of interest in your usual activities, including sex
- Overeating, especially foods high in carbohydrates
- Difficulty concentrating
- Weight gain
- Social withdrawal

Tips for coping with SAD and When to see a Doctor

If you experience symptoms of seasonal depression, there are a number of ways to cope. For mild depression, consider getting more sun exposure during the day. Take a midday walk to get as much sun as possible to relieve symptoms.

For more severe bouts of depression, light therapy, antidepressants and psychotherapy are all possible options, but it is important to discuss your concerns with a mental health professional to ensure that your chosen treatment is the best choice for your specific needs.

It is normal to have some days when you feel down. But if you feel down for days at a time and you can't seem to get motivated to do activities you normally enjoy. See your doctor. This is particularly important if you notice that your sleep patterns and appetite have changed or if you feel hopeless, think about suicide, or find yourself turning to alcohol for comfort or relaxation.

How Can an Employee Assistance Program Help?

St Luke's Employee Assistance Program can provide services tailored to the needs of people experiencing seasonal affective disorder. Through their offerings, employees have access to professional counselors who work with other healthcare professionals to ensure sufferers receive the support they need.

Where it is deemed the appropriate type of treatment, counselors can offer emotional support and work one-on-one with employees to help them develop strategies to manage their symptoms and improve their overall quality of life.



Resources:

[En.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seasonal/affective/disorder](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seasonal/affective/disorder)

Depression.about.com/cs/sad/a/sad

www.standardlife.ca/en/pdf/group_ins/newsletter/en_eap_feb2008