

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

What is SAD Exactly?

SAD is a mood disorder that affects an individual the same time each year, usually starting when the weather becomes colder in September or October, and ends in April or May when the weather becomes warmer. People with SAD feel depressed during the shorter days of winter, and more cheerful and energetic during the brightness of spring and summer.

5 Things You May Not Have Known About SAD

1. Did you know that between 60% and 90% of people with SAD are women? It's true. If you are a female between 15 and 55, you are more likely to develop SAD. BUT if you don't identify as a female between 15 and 55, you still could have SAD!
2. Even though the harsh chill in the air might bring you down, SAD is believed to relate more to daylight, not the temperature. Some experts believe that a lack of sunlight increases the body's production of a body chemical called melatonin. Melatonin is what helps regulate sleep and can cause symptoms of depression.
3. SAD can be treated. If your symptoms are mild, meaning, if they do not interfere in and completely ruin your daily life, light therapy may help you beat SAD. Using light therapy has shown highly effective. Studies prove that between 50% and 80% of light therapy users have complete remissions of symptoms. However, light therapy must be used for a certain amount of time daily and continue throughout the dark, winter months.
4. There are some things to consider if you want to try light therapy (also known as happy lamps) in your home, otherwise you will not receive all the benefits that this type of therapy offers.
 - The best time for light therapy is in the early morning. (If used late at night, it could cause insomnia.) So, even if it means waking up earlier, set aside some morning time to relax and use your light box.
 - Many people are not aware of this, but you must have your eyes open and face the light during therapy. Do not stare at the light. That would be silly. Simply face the light, eyes open.
5. If you have a friend or loved one who suffers from SAD, you can help them tremendously.
 - Try to spend more time with the person, even though they may not seem to want any company.
 - Help them with their treatment plan.
 - Remind them often that summer is only a season away. Tell them that their sad feelings are only temporary, and they will feel better in no time.
 - Go outside and do something together. Take a walk, or exercise. Get them to spend some time outside in the natural sunlight. Just remember to bundle up!

Treating SAD

Light Boxes (Happy Lamps)

Research has found that the majority of those suffering from the winter blues experienced relief solely from the regular use of light boxes. Light boxes emit high intensities of light of 2,500 to 10,000 lux (as compared to a normal light fixture that emits 250 to 500 lux) and produce similar effects to the sun's natural rays. The high intensities of light improve the mood of those suffering from the winter blues because they restrict the secretion of melatonin in the brain.

These boxes are best used daily and in the early morning for periods of 30 minutes to two hours. Depending on the severity of the winter blues case, most people find their symptoms are gone after just 2 weeks of use. Find more AmeriCorps budget-friendly Happy Lamps [here](#) and [here](#).

Exercise and its benefits for the blues

Exercise has proven to help people combat feeling of the blues in the winter. Not only does exercise improve mood, but it also has been shown to reduce stress, which often exacerbates feelings of depression brought on by the winter blues.

Studies have pointed out that one hour doing aerobic exercise outside (even with a cloudy skies overhead) had the same benefits as 2.5 hours of light treatment indoors. Aerobic exercise can help a person rid themselves of the feelings of depression. Briskly walking, taking a run, skiing, sledding and having a snowball fight have all be proven to help suffers of the blues feel better.

Eating Right

Many people who suffer from the winter blues crave junk food and soft drinks as the days get shorter. The reason some people indulge in high-sugar foods is because carbohydrates are often effective in increasing energy levels in the brain.

A better strategy for anyone with the winter blues would be to eat larger portions of complex carbohydrates, like pasta and rice, and healthy simple carbohydrates like fruits and fruit juices during meals. Also, stay away from unhealthy snacks that will cause momentary relief, but ultimately decrease energy and increases weight gain for many. Increased weight gain may also lower a person's self-esteem, worsening one's depression. (Also eating healthy makes those EBT dollars go even farther, allowing you to get the most bang for your buck while on your stipend.)

Sleep Better

An unhealthy sleep-wake schedule can limit the number of hours that those with the winter blues are exposed to sunlight. Winter blues sufferers should make an effort to expose themselves to sunlight in the early morning. Take a walk outside or open the curtains in your room as soon as you rise.

Try to limit sleep to 8-hour periods on a regular schedule. Oversleeping and fluctuation in sleep-wake schedule causes increases in levels of melatonin during sleep, which can contribute to feelings of depression. Set a regular bedtime and wake up at the same time each day. This will give you more energy during the day and reduce feelings of depression.

Spend Time with People

It's natural to pull away from people and want to spend time cuddled up in your bed when your struggling with SAD. But you'll benefit from some social interactions by letting people know you're having a hard time and letting them reach out to help take care of you.

