

SAD? How to Beat the Winter Blues

If the cold weather is making you gloomy and feeling down, drained and grouchy, you may be suffering from depression known as Seasonal Affective Disorder. SAD usually starts as the days are shorter and ends in late Spring when the days become brighter and longer.

You may have SAD when

- You feel better when sunny weather arrives. Unlike regular depression that stays all year.
- The pattern repeats at least two years in a row.
- There is no obvious cause for low mood, such as being out of work.

You can recognize SAD by if you have two or more of these symptoms:

- Feeling more tired or has lower energy?
- Requiring more sleep?
- Typically gain weight?
- Visit your doctor more often?
- Having trouble waking in the morning?
- Become irritable?
- Crave more sweets and carbohydrates
- Withdraw socially.

SADness happens when winter's late dawn and early dusk because changes in the body's internal biological clock, or day-to-day rhythm. This affects levels of mood-altering brain chemicals, including the feel-good chemical serotonin, as well as the hormone melatonin.

When you are low in serotonin you can feel tired, depressed and crave carbohydrates. Weight gain in winter can be a result of eating more as you self-medicate to raise your serotonin and feel better. Serotonin levels are lowest in February and highest in August.

SADness can be reduced different ways. These can include: light therapy, exercise, stress management, counseling and medication or a combination.

For Light Therapy: Sitting in front of a light box is the most studied treatment and can bring relief to 75 percent of those with SADness. Light can be as effective as medication in many cases.

Exercise and stress management can include the following:

- **Bundle up and go for a walk in the sun.** Even 10 minutes will raise your mood and self-esteem as you soak up that vitamin D.
- **Nurture yourself.** When you awaken, give yourself 30 seconds to answer this question, "What is one nice thing I can do for myself today? Then do it! This quick decision will set the stage for the rest of your day.

- **Find water.** Swimming, walking, or sitting beside a lake or stream raises the brain's serotonin level.
- **Invite a friend to exercise.** Companionship and exercise double the benefits.
- **Breathe out that stress.** Practice mindful, slow deep breathing, yoga or meditation. Breathe out through a straw to slow your breathing to six breaths per minute.
- **Take five minutes.** Before you get out of bed, tune into your breath and body. Notice any stiffness, and then stretch gently as you breathe deeply while lying in your bed.
- **Mood music.** Discover soothing music and play it as you do daily activities.

If none of these help your SADness, then you may need medication. It is the most affective when combined with counseling and light therapy. If you are sad with SAD symptoms, please seek help.

Sources: Mayo Clinic: "Choosing a Light Therapy Box."; 10 Things You Didn't know about Seasonal Affective Disorder. PSYCH Central; and West Virginia University Extension Service.