

A True Cause for the Holiday Blues



We may all experience the "Holiday Blues" from time to time. With the cold winter approaching it may bring more than cold weather. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) also known as the "Holiday Blues" is a type of depression that occurs during the fall months and usually improves during the spring. Women tend to have higher rates of this type of depression. People who live in places with long winter nights are at increased risk of developing this form of depression.

The specific cause of SAD remains unknown. There are three factors that researchers believe may contribute to this phenomenon.

- Circadian rhythm, our body's internal clock.
- Melatonin levels help with our sleep pattern and mood.
- Serotonin levels, a chemical found in our brain.

During the fall we experience shorter daylight hours and longer nights. With a decreased in sunlight exposure, our circadian rhythm may become altered leading us to changes in our sleep pattern.

When the cold winter days shorter, our melatonin levels increase causing us to be a sleeper, more lethargic and moody - may lead to sleep deprivation. Another piece of the puzzle with SAD is our serotonin levels decrease during the winter months. This neurotransmitter can cause mood swings, anxiety, and sadness. All these components together create the perfect storm for the "Winter Blues."



It may be difficult to determine if the symptoms are related to Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) or Major Depression because the symptoms are similar with the exception, SAD symptoms are transient and usually goes into remission during the spring. Major Depression symptoms are chronic and do not go away.



These symptoms may include but not limited to:

- feeling depressed
- fatigued
- changes in sleep patterns
- cravings for carbohydrates, overeating
- weight gain
- difficulty concentrating
- a feeling of self-worthless or hopeless
- frequent thoughts of death or suicide

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It is essential to seek treatment by a medical provider or mental health professional, for confirmation of the diagnosis of Seasonal Affective Disorder depression, if depression is interfering with daily activity.

Sun exposure or phototherapy has shown to help with treating SAD according to, Mental Health America, although, there have been no research findings to link this therapy. It has proved to be effective in up to 85 percent of SAD depression cases.

Dr. Darren Cotterell, of St. James Hospital, states in, Progress in Neurology and Psychiatry's report on, Pathogenesis and management of seasonal affective disorder,

"There is evidence supporting the tailored use of psychotropic medication (bupropion and SSRIs), light therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy and melatonin in seasonal affective disorders."

Staying inside under blankets during the cold, dreary days of winter could put you at risk or worsen symptoms of SAD. Get out of the house and exercise to help relieve those sad feelings, while adding the benefits of sunlight exposure.

Thoughts of self-harm or suicide are considered an emergency, and be should be taken seriously. Seek professional help immediately.

There is hope with SAD, as the spring season starts to peek through near the end of winter, symptoms of this type of depression will begin to fade away. Spring brings more extended periods of daylight and shorter nights. Flowers start to bloom providing beautiful colors to enjoy, and new life begins.

