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Understanding Seasonal Affective Disorder

Learn the difference between this serious condition and the winter blues

By Barbara Brody, Posted on January 26, 2010 11:00 AM



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You may have heard of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), a condition in which you get depressed during the winter months, and wondered if it was real--and serious. Here's what you need to know. Doesn't Everyone Get a Bit Down in the Winter? Is This Really a "Disorder"? It's true that many people feel kind of moody when it's cold and gray outside, and it's not unusual to want to linger in bed a bit longer or reach for hearty comfort foods this time of year. SAD goes beyond that. People who have this disorder--and yes, it's real--experience serious symptoms of depression, such as difficulty concentrating, insomnia, irritability and feelings of worthlessness. Someone with SAD may find herself crying often, feeling down for no apparent reason, not enjoying her usual activities or even considering suicide. How Is SAD Different from "Regular" Depression? The main difference is that someone who has standard clinical depression feels down throughout the year, regardless of the season. Someone with SAD experiences a depression that's highly seasonal: She may feel perfectly fine and happy in the spring and summer, but every winter she falls back into a depressive state, explains Michael Young, PhD, associate professor in the Institute of Psychology at Illinois Institute of Technology. Symptoms may last several months, beginning in the late fall and peaking in January or February.

How Is It Diagnosed? SAD can be difficult to diagnose. "A doctor has to think in terms of seasonal cycles when seeing each patient," says Michael Terman, PhD, director of the Center for Light Treatment and Biological Rhythms at Columbia University Medical School in New York. "Visits to the doctor's office usually provide nonseasonal 'snapshots,' so that factor is easily overlooked in favor of supposed immediate causes, like work stress." That means in some cases you may have to identify the problem yourself first, then seek an expert's help to confirm the diagnosis. Or if you're already getting help for depression but suspect a seasonal component, be sure to mention that to your doctor.

What's the Treatment? Experts believe that changes in the amount of sunlight you're exposed to shift your biological rhythms, and that some people are more sensitive to these changes than others, says Dr. Young. That's why the most common treatment for SAD involves light therapy, which entails exposing yourself to light, not just more often, but also at very specific times of the day to try to reset these rhythms. For some people, just taking a walk in the morning after the sun comes up may be enough, but most people with SAD require the use of a light

box. This device emits a bright light but doesn't contain UV rays; how often and when you use it will vary depending on the plan you develop with your doctor, but most patients will be told to sit in front of it (about 15 to 18 inches away) early in the morning for about half an hour daily. "Dozens of studies have shown that light therapy is very effective for most people with SAD, and you'll know if it's working or not after the first two weeks," says Dr. Young. Light boxes are sold over the counter (so you don't need a prescription), but it's a good idea to talk to your doctor about the best model for your needs before purchasing one--especially since it's a bit of an investment (most range from \$100 to \$300). You can learn more about SAD at CET.org or SLTBR.org.
