

Light Up Your Life

How to cope with Seasonal Affective Disorder this fall/winter season

By Stacey Haseleu

It's the time of year when the crisp autumn breeze whispers through the trees, rustling the vibrant colored leaves to the ground. Pumpkin patches and apple cider, families coming together for Thanksgiving and pumpkin pies, haunted houses and tricks or treats; but even with all the fun activities and cozy family time, many people have come to dread this time of year. The days are shorter, daylight savings time ends, and long nights of dreary, unrelenting rain and wind occupy the weather forecast. I hear it in line at the grocery store, on the elevators at work, and in the waiting room at the doctor's office, "This early darkness just has me so drained. I go to work in the dark and come home in the dark. I have no energy!"

While it's natural for our bodies to go through an adjustment period during the change in seasons, for some this adjustment doesn't just include a minor increase in sleepiness and lack of energy. In fact, health professionals indicate that some individuals struggling with the change in seasons may be affected by a medical condition ironically known as SAD, an acronym for [Seasonal Affective Disorder](#).

Seasonal Affective Disorder is characterized by the following [symptoms](#), which occur during the change in seasons:

- ❖ Depression
- ❖ Difficulty waking up in the morning
- ❖ An inability to concentrate or complete tasks
- ❖ The craving of carbohydrates
- ❖ A tendency to oversleep and overeat
- ❖ Weight gain
- ❖ Morning sickness
- ❖ Withdrawal from friends, family, and social situations

At least [4% to 6%](#) of the U.S. population has been diagnosed with SAD, but health professionals believe that an even greater number of Americans are suffering undiagnosed. Although SAD can be diagnosed in a variety of individuals – men and women of all ages and geographic backgrounds – SAD is [most prevalent](#) in those who live in seasonal climates, women, people between the ages of 15 and 55, and those with a close relative also suffering from the disorder. As a person's [age](#) increases, the likelihood of that individual developing SAD decreases. In fact, most develop the disorder before the age of 20, leaving adolescents and young adults at greater risk for the onset of SAD.

Although experts are not entirely sure what causes the disorder, it is believed to have stemmed from a disruption in the [circadian rhythm](#). The circadian rhythm is the body's 24-hour "biological clock," which is regulated by the light and dark of our environment. It [controls such body functions](#) as temperature, sleeping and waking, and body fluid balance.

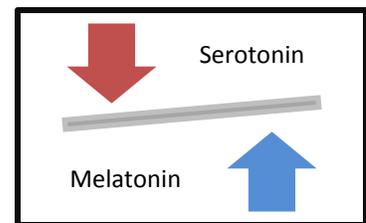


Figure 1.1

[Dr. Victoria Revell](#), an expert in chronobiology – the study of circadian rhythms – states, "One key role of light is to synchronize our circadian body clock to the 24-hour day." SAD sufferers, she indicates, require

a higher light intensity to regulate their body clocks. In the winter when light levels are lower, they produce too much melatonin (the hormone which helps us sleep) and less of the “feel-good” hormone, serotonin (see Figure 1.1).

So how do you know if you or a family member is suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder? And, what treatments are available if you are diagnosed?

According to [Dr. Lawrence Price](#), Professor of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at Brown Medical School and Clinical Director and Director of Mood Disorders Research at Butler Hospital, “Many people confuse seasonal blues or holiday blues with Seasonal Affective Disorder. People with Seasonal Affective Disorder have a serious illness. It is more than just feeling blue after spending a week with your family during the holidays.”

Doctors are usually able to make the diagnosis if you meet the following [criteria](#):

- ❖ Depression during the same season that alleviates with the changing of seasons and comes back at least two years in a row
- ❖ You have some or all of the symptoms listed above
- ❖ A close relative has been diagnosed with SAD

Your physician will also consider whether you may be suffering from regular clinical depression as opposed to Seasonal Affective Disorder. Dr. Price states, “The difference is that in depression the symptoms are bi-directional. You might want too much sleep, or not enough. You may overeat and gain weight or under eat and lose weight. With Seasonal Affective Disorder it only goes one way, you oversleep and overeat.”



Figure 1.2

There is hope, however, for those suffering from SAD. Your doctor may prescribe anti-depressants which can help the serotonin imbalance in your brain. Cognitive- behavioral, or talk therapy can also be effective in helping manage the symptoms of SAD. But, perhaps, the most promising treatment in alleviating SAD is [light therapy](#).

Light therapy is administered through a “light box” that comes in various styles and can look similar to a regular lamp (see Figure 1.2); however, its high intensity, fluorescent bulbs (10,000 lux) emit a therapeutic light [10 to 20 times brighter](#) than ordinary indoor lighting. Health Professionals suggest that an individual suffering from SAD sit in front of the light for at least 30 minutes per day to feel the full effect of its therapy. Many individuals place the lamp on a desktop where they can go online or complete other desk work while receiving the therapy. Others place the light on their nightstand facing towards them and reap the benefits of the light while reading in bed.

In addition to light therapy, doctors also suggest regular, moderate exercise such as walking, riding a stationary bike, or swimming. They stress the importance of morning activity which allows an individual suffering from SAD to feel more energy and less depressed from the start of the day.

Although the changing of the clocks and shorter days may still evoke a sigh of desperation, a glimmer of “light” at the end of the dark tunnel is in sight. Those suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder can

greatly benefit from light therapy. Coupled with exercise and a doctor's care, perhaps these individuals will also be able to enjoy the pumpkin patches, apple cider, and family gatherings associated with the fall and winter months.

References

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