



Don't Be SAD

Understanding and Relieving Seasonal Affective Disorder

As much as people may enjoy the winter holidays, many people do heave a sigh of relief when they've come and gone and life can settle back into its normal routine. But for the thousands of people who suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD, for short), the months of January and February can be the hardest time of the year. That's because the lower light levels in these months can trigger higher production of melatonin (sometimes known as the "hibernation hormone") and depress levels of serotonin in the brain, leading to various symptoms associated with depression.

SAD has been observed since the 1800s, but has been extensively studied only in the last 20 years. It's estimated that half a million people are affected every winter between the months of September and April. For many people SAD is a crippling illness that makes it difficult to function on even the most basic levels. For others the symptoms are milder, an additional burden, like the extra layers of clothing we have to wear in winter. The symptoms of SAD include any of the following:

- Fatigue, lethargy, oversleeping
- Anxiety or disturbed sleep
- Overeating or cravings for sweet, starchy foods
- Loss of libido
- Loss of desire for contact with other people
- Mood swings, especially in fall and spring the transitional times

Generally speaking, a formal diagnosis of SAD is based on observing these symptoms over three successive winters, with none of these symptoms—or significantly less symptoms—occurring during other seasons. Many people suffering from SAD also suffer, as one might expect, from depressed immune systems, leaving them more vulnerable to colds, flu and other contagious illnesses. In general, people aged 30 and younger, as well as women, are considered more likely to suffer from SAD.

SAD is related to a lack of exposure to light. It was traditionally called "winter blues" or "cabin fever" in colder, northern climates. John Ott, a time lapse photographer is credited with discovering that light has an effect on nervous and glandular function. He observed that different kinds of light caused plants to grow differently and did experiments to prove that animals raised under different colors (or spectrums) of light developed various health problems.

It appears that the pineal gland, which produces melatonin in darkness, is a link between the kind of light we are exposed to and the nervous and glandular systems. During the winter months, many people get up and drive to work in the darkness, work under artificial lights all day, and drive home in the dark. With no exposure to natural sunlight, various mood changes occur, including the SAD syndrome.

So, an important answer to SAD is phototherapy—exposing oneself to additional light. The units used to measure exposure to light are called "lux," and the amount of light in an average office is usually in the range of 200-500 lux. By contrast, the amount of light on a sunny summer day can be as much as 100,000 lux. Research indicates that mid-day sunlight (even in wintertime) is more beneficial than the artificial lighting usually used in phototherapy and that a one-hour walk at mid-day is equivalent to two and one-half hours of exposure to artificial light. However, using full spectrum lights at work can be helpful. Full spectrum lights have even been shown to reduce behavioral problems with children in school.

In addition to phototherapy, there are also phytotherapy (herbal) helps for SAD, as well as some nutritional aids. St. John's wort is an excellent choice for SAD as it appears to make a person more light sensitive. Numerous studies have established its ability to improve symptoms of depression, anxiety, insomnia and to increase self-esteem. Be aware that its anti-depressant properties may require up to eight weeks to take full effect, so you should start taking it in the fall if you wish to avoid SAD. Calendula is another single herb which can help with SAD.

Mood Elevator is a Chinese antidepressant formula which can also be helpful for SAD. It corrects sagging energy and sagging spirits. It also helps reduce anxiety. 5-HTP Power is another formula that may be helpful for SAD. It contains 5-hydroxytryptophan, a precursor to serotonin. It can help with sleep disturbances and moodiness and is a natural alternative to SSRI drugs commonly prescribed for SAD.

Of course, other factors which can contribute to depression should also be considered. Adequate exercise, good nutrition, taking time for recreation, and finding ways to rest and to release the accumulated stresses that we all pick up over the course of time are the foundation on which any program for relieving depression should be built. For more information on dealing with seasonal affective disorder or depression of any kind using natural remedies, consult your local herb specialist.

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