

What is Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD?

Are you not quite yourself at this time of year? The season may be to blame. It's not the end of the holidays or the nasty weather that gives some people the blues in winter. It's the lack of sunlight. The shorter days of winter can trigger a kind of depression known as seasonal affective disorder, called S-A-D or "SAD".

People who suffer from seasonal affective disorder may lack energy during the winter months. They may sleep more than normal, but still not feel rested, and they don't have much enthusiasm for life. They often have an increased appetite, especially for sweets. While many of us may feel this way from time to time, SAD patients feel this way for days or weeks at a stretch, and it happens to them every winter.

SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) is a clinically diagnosed disorder typically characterized by a fall or winter onset with several of the following symptoms:

- feeling sad or depressed
- lethargy
- difficulty concentrating
- carbohydrate or sugar cravings (often accompanied by weight gain)
- difficulty waking in the morning
- sleep disturbance
- social withdrawal
- reduced productivity
- irritability

These symptoms are a result of important brain chemicals, namely serotonin and melatonin, becoming imbalanced due to the decreased availability of light in the fall and winter seasons. The impact of SAD is felt in one's general emotional state, relationships, occupation, and/or overall sense of life satisfaction. When untreated, the symptoms typically worsen as winter progresses. In the northern latitudes, this disorder affects up to one in five people.

What are the Winter Blues?

The winter blues are a less severe form of seasonal affective disorder. However, just because there may not be as many symptoms does not mean treatment should not be sought. In fact, the winter blues are, like seasonal affective disorder, quite treatable.

What Causes SAD?

Medical research reveals seasonal affective disorder, the winter blues, and winter worsening are caused by the decreased exposure to sunlight. During the fall and winter

months, less light passes through the eyes which inhibits the release of an important brain chemical, serotonin. When serotonin is not released in sufficient quantity, depressive symptoms begin to occur. Melatonin, another important brain chemical, also is affected by insufficient light. The brain releases too much of this chemical at the wrong time, also contributing to depressive symptoms.