

## FEAT FACTSHEET

### Understanding SAD

### (Seasonal Affective Disorder)

#### Why do we have seasonal mood changes?

Most of us feel better when the sun is shining – more cheerful and energetic. On grey, gloomy days, especially in winter, we tend to feel less enthusiastic, more inclined to stay indoors or even in bed, to do less work, to socialise less and to eat more. The reason for this is the change in the quality and quantity of light. As winter approaches, there are fewer daylight hours and so, by December, we often get up in the dark and come home from work or school in darkness. What's more, the shorter winter days don't have the same light intensity that we get in summer.

The cycle of light and dark determines our sleeping and waking patterns. Until the widespread use of electric light, people used to wake and get up with the dawn light and sleep when it became dark. In winter, people would sleep longer and be less active. Nowadays, we tend to override these natural rhythms and manipulate the hours of light and darkness to suit our sophisticated lifestyle. Many night-shift workers and jet-lagged air travellers suffer from disrupting their body clocks.

**The effects of light:** Some people seem to be more affected than others by lack of daylight. When light hits the retina, messages are passed to the part of the brain that rules sleep, appetite, sex drive, temperature, mood and activity. If there's not enough light, these functions are likely to slow down and gradually stop, like a car that is running out of fuel. Some people seem to need a lot more light than others to keep them on the road, and these are the people who develop seasonal affective disorder (SAD), to a greater or lesser extent.

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**What are the effects of SAD?** Nine out of ten people report that they eat and sleep more in winter and that long stretches of grey skies make them more down in the dumps – this is all perfectly natural. But for those with SAD, the changes in mood and behaviour are much more severe, and happen regularly, each winter, following a seasonal pattern. Symptoms (for people in Northern Europe) may start emerging between September and November and continue until March, April or even May. The symptoms go away in spring, either suddenly (with a short period of hyperactivity) or gradually, depending on the amount of sunlight in the spring and early summer.

**Symptoms:** Unfortunately, SAD is often misdiagnosed or overlooked. Once someone has experienced two or three winters of symptoms, they can be said to be suffering from SAD. The symptoms are many and varied, and include:

- lethargy or fatigue – no energy for everyday tasks
- feeling under the weather – people with SAD have a lowered immune system during the winter, and are more likely to get constant colds and infections
- sleep problems – oversleeping, disturbed sleep, waking too early in the morning, unable to stay awake during the day
- depression (including postnatal depression) – feeling sad, low, weepy, guilty, a failure; sometimes hopeless and despairing, apathetic and feeling nothing
- mood changes – in some people, bursts of overactivity and cheerfulness (known as hypomania) in spring and autumn
- anxiety – tenseness and inability to cope with everyday stresses; panic attacks
- social problems – irritability and not wanting to see people; abusive behaviour
- concentration problems – difficulty 'thinking straight' or making decisions
- eating problems—overeating, craving carbohydrates and putting on weight; bulimia – eating large amounts of food and then vomiting
- loss of libido – not being interested in sex or physical contact
- alcohol and drug abuse

A small percentage of people have very severe symptoms and can't function in winter without continuous treatment. However, for some people, symptoms are fairly mild and last for a shorter period and are known as the 'winter blues'. Occurring mainly during December, January and February, symptoms typically might include tiredness, lethargy, sleeping and eating problems.

**Who gets SAD?** It's extremely rare to find people with symptoms of SAD living within 30 degrees of the equator, where daylight hours are long and extremely bright. But it can affect people anywhere else in the northern and southern hemispheres – from Scandinavia, in the North, throughout Europe, in most of North America and North Asia, and as far as the southern parts of Australia and South America. It is estimated that around 10 per cent of the population of Northern Europe suffer milder symptoms of SAD, while about two per cent suffer very badly. Some people even get SAD in summer, during dull periods.

People who have lived near the tropics for part of their lives and then emigrated to this country seem to be more vulnerable to SAD symptoms. Note: people from different cultural backgrounds may show symptoms differently, and this can sometimes lead to being misdiagnosed with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, for instance. SAD can begin at any age, most commonly between 18 and 30, with more people developing it before the age of 21 than after.

**What sort of treatment is there?** Many people make their own diagnosis and treat themselves, but it may be a good idea to talk to your GP about your symptoms and how you're dealing with it. Ideally, any treatment should be medically supervised, either by a GP or a SAD clinic. Unfortunately, there are only a few NHS clinics in this country, and you may have to wait a long time for an appointment.

**What else can I do to help myself?** We know that being outdoors throughout the winter isn't a cure, because many farmers and outdoor workers have SAD. But, it's still worth making the most of the available light. Go outdoors in natural daylight as much as possible, especially at midday and on bright days. Inside the home, choose pale colours that reflect light from outside. Sit near windows, when you can.

Try to avoid putting yourself under stress. Pay attention to the messages that your mind and body are sending you that winter is a time to take it easier and go into hibernation. Even if you can't curl up in bed and sleep for months, you can simplify life in winter. Be ruthless about which tasks can be left until summer, especially major upheavals, such as changing jobs, moving home, extra housework and decorating or repairs. Plan ahead for the winter. Buy Christmas presents, stock up cupboards and give parties in the summer, when you want to.

You need to keep active during the winter, but with routine stress-free activities that don't require too much concentration or drain your energy. There's plenty of evidence to show how good physical activity is for mental wellbeing, and for helping with problems such as depression. One research study showed that a daily one-hour walk, in the middle of the day, could be as helpful as light treatment for coping with the winter blues.

A healthy diet is also important, and you should try to balance the SAD craving for carbohydrates, such as pasta and potatoes, with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. Pamper yourself physically with a massage, or learn how relaxation exercises can help you unwind. Look into the benefits of complementary medicine as an option. St John's wort is a popular herbal remedy available over the counter in the UK. There is some evidence that it is an effective treatment for mild to moderate depression. This would be appropriate for the winter blues, although not for severe SAD.

**How can family and friends help?** It's not always easy to live with someone who has SAD. It's like being with two different people, one who is lively, cheerful and energetic, during the summer, and the other who is sleepy, morose and irritable, during the winter. In summer, he or she can be hard to keep up with; in winter, you won't get much response from him or her.

Try to accept that your friend or family member feels awful. They aren't being lazy, or not making an effort. They sleep because they have to; they can't help it. Being hostile about it or teasing them is likely to make things worse. Having SAD is no joke; it's been described as feeling half dead, half your life. Sometimes, it can drive people to suicide.

Offer practical assistance, if you can. It's important to get treatment and other matters organised during the summer, because once winter comes, someone with SAD soon finds apathy taking hold. As soon as you notice signs of lethargy, encourage the person to start their treatment programme and to stick with it. If they are using light treatment, build it into daily life. If the person needs an hour's light before going to work or school, make sure other chores or responsibilities don't interfere. Help them to pace themselves, and be sensitive about making too many demands on them. In the long run, it's in nobody's interest if they become more stressed.

It can be very upsetting when someone is constantly irritable and seems unwilling to give or accept love. Relationships can be strained to breaking point if one partner feels it's all too one-sided. Hard though it might be to imagine or understand, being depressed can be emotionally paralyzing. Someone in the grip of it may be unable to feel happy, caring and loving in the usual way. Whatever it may seem, they are not deliberately rejecting you. They may be desperate for love and care, and yet not able to accept it, when it's offered. Be patient, but insist they get treatment. You can then both look forward to better times.

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