

# DEPRESSION & THE HOLIDAY BLUES

## SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

(PubMed Health. A service of the National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health. A.D.A.M. Medical Encyclopedia [Internet]. Atlanta (GA): A.D.A.M.; 2013.)

*Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that occurs at a certain time of the year, usually in the winter.*

### **Causes, Incidence, and Risk Factors:**

SAD may begin during the teen years or in adulthood. Like other forms of depression, it occurs more often in women than in men.

People who live in places with long winter nights are at greater risk of SAD. A less common form of the disorder involves depression during the summer months.

### **Symptoms:**

Symptoms usually build up slowly in the late autumn and winter months. Symptoms are usually the same as with other forms of depression:

- Hopelessness
- Increased appetite with weight gain (weight loss is more common with other forms of depression)
- Increased sleep (too little sleep is more common with other forms of depression)
- Less energy and ability to concentrate
- Loss of interest in work or other activities
- Sluggish movements
- Social withdrawal
- Unhappiness and irritability

### **Signs and Tests:**

There is no test for SAD. Your health care provider can make a diagnosis by asking about your history of symptoms.

The health care provider may also perform a physical exam and blood tests to rule out other disorders that are similar to SAD.

### **Treatment:**

As with other types of depression, antidepressant medicines and talk therapy can be effective.

## MANAGING YOUR DEPRESSION AT HOME

### To Manage Your Symptoms at Home:

- Get enough sleep.
  - Eat healthy foods.
  - Take medicines the right way. Ask your health care provider how to manage side effects.
  - Learn to watch for early signs that your depression is getting worse. Have a plan if it does get worse.
  - Try to exercise more often. Do activities that make you happy.
- Do not use alcohol and illegal drugs. These can make depression worse. They can also affect your judgment about suicide.

When you are struggling with depression, talk about how you are feeling with someone you trust. Try to be around people who are caring and positive. Volunteer or get involved with group activities.

### LIGHT THERAPY

Your health care provider may prescribe light therapy. Light therapy uses a special lamp with a very bright light that mimics light from the sun.

Treatment starts in the fall or early winter, before the symptoms of SAD begin. Follow your health care provider's instructions about how to use light therapy. One recommendation is to sit a couple of feet away from the light box for about 30 minutes each day, typically done in the early morning, to mimic sunrise.

Keep your eyes open, but do not look straight into the light source. Symptoms of depression should improve within 3 to 4 weeks if light therapy is going to help.

### Side Effects of Light Therapy Include:

•Eye strain and headache or Mania (rare)  
People who take medicines that make them more sensitive to light, such as certain psoriasis drugs, antibiotics, or antipsychotics, should not use light therapy.

\*Get a checkup with your eye doctor before starting treatment\*

- With no treatment, symptoms usually get better with the change of seasons.
- Symptoms can improve more quickly with treatment.

### Expectations (Prognosis):

The outcome is usually good with treatment. Some people, though, have SAD throughout their lives.

Call your health care provider:

Get medical help right away if you have thoughts of hurting yourself or anyone else.

#### References

1.Byrne B, Brainard GC. Seasonal affective disorder and light therapy. Sleep Med Clin. 2008;3:307-315.

## Some Self-Help Suggestions

### SOLO:

1. Let the sadness in then let it pass.
2. Pray or meditate.
3. Take a nap.
4. Cry it out. It's cleansing, it brings a sense of relief and it releases stress hormones that can cause serious damage to brain cells.
5. Think about your favorite things.
6. Practice yoga or do any kind of exercise.
7. Retreat; be at peace with silence and limit outside stimuli.

### GET SOCIAL:

8. Take a social media fast and instead, connect only in real time and in person.
9. Sip tea, coffee, or wine with someone. Ponder the depths of existentialism.
10. Break out a cookbook, invite a friend or two over and make a meal from recipes that you've never tried before.
11. Recall a fond memory about someone, contact that person and let that person know you remembered him/her.
12. Give a co-worker a ride home.
13. Talk to a stranger. Ask a safe and simple question and see where it leads. On the other hand, share an anecdote and wait for a response. Be open to how easily others are willing to connect.
14. Visit some blogs and leave a comment.

### LOSE YOURSELF:

15. Perform an anonymous act of kindness.
16. Pop a feel-good dvd in the player and allow yourself a little veg time.
17. Do something silly and let go of self-conscious feelings.
18. Do something you would not normally do.
19. Laugh it up at an improv/comedy show.
20. Invite a little unpredictability into your life.
21. Go for a drive without a particular destination. Feel the breeze and let your senses take in the feeling of not having a particular place to go.
22. Go sightseeing where you live; you never know what you might find.

### LET NATURE FILE YOUR SENSES:

23. Get outdoors. Whether it is a walk down a busy city street or a nature hike, there's something about being outdoors that makes a little bit of the sadness evaporate. Perhaps, if you are open, you will notice a stranger or two smiling at you.
24. Surrender to nature and feel its immense power.
25. Watch the ripples of waves, as they grow more and more intense.
26. Hug a tree and feel its strong unyielding roots.
27. If you are an early riser like me, watch the sunrise and remind yourself that you'll never ever see the same exact sunrise again.
28. Go surfing or go for a swim in the ocean or lake.

29. Do a little gardening.

### GET CREATIVE OR IMMERSE YOURSELF IN ART:

30. Take pictures.

31. Draw or paint.

32. Write a song, a poem or a short story.

33. Read a classic.

34. Be in awe of a work of art. A photograph or a painting is a good source of awe-inspiring moments that can transport you to another place and melt sadness.

35. Listen to music that moves you.

36. Sing and dance.

### TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF:

37. Pamper yourself by getting a mani/pedi, a facial or a massage. It sounds indulgent but who says you do not deserve it?

38. Plan a vacation or a simple day trip.

39. Get a haircut.

40. Make a smoothie. Throw a whole bunch of fruits in season in a blender and nourish your body and spirit.

41. Start a new healthy habit.

### GET EDUCATED:

42. Learn about a new country that you would like to visit, or have been curious about.

43. Take a class: Pottery, philosophy, business, anything.

### GET BUSY:

44. Do some chores. Purge your closet of unwanted things and donate a bag of clothes and shoes to Goodwill; de-clutter your home and clear your mind in the process.

45. Throw yourself into your work or start a new project.

46. Plan and throw a party. Watch the sadness turn to excitement.

### DO FOR OTHERS:

47. Visit a pregnant friend or a friend with a newborn baby and find out what you can do for her.

48. Visit a sick friend and offer to pick up take out.

49. Walk your neighbor's dog.

50. Offer to run an errand for a parent with young kids.

51. Pick up a greeting card or a present for someone. Any chance you can focus on making someone else's day will help brighten your day.

52. Volunteer at a soup kitchen.

53. Help wrap presents for orphans or sick children through a local charity.