

Suffering from Fall and Winter Doldrums?

By John P Carneseccchi, MSW, LCSW, CEAP

Carrey couldn't stand it. The trees were turning. No, they were dying, and leaving her here alone. The whole world was melting into some grey, cold puddle. Every fall and winter was like this. First the trees would go; the wind would whip at the few people left in the streets, and it would all be sealed under a steel sky. Winter wasn't even here yet, and she could feel its weight bearing down. The rest of the signs were there too. Fancy dinners with her fiancé didn't live up to the tub of ice cream at home. The sun felt further away each day. Sex was a chore. Already she had started giving lame excuses to avoid going out with her friends. In a one-color world, what was the point?

Seasonal Affective Disorder

As the pollen count falls, so too do our spirits. Cold air burns us, our lips chap, scent vanishes from the world, and we seek shelter under weighty clothes. If you have Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), now is the time to break it---right before the symptoms begin and depression starts.

It may seem like there is little to be done. You can't stop the earth from turning on its axis, after all. But SAD, like all depression can be challenged if you are prepared.

No one knows the exact mechanism of SAD – the most popular hypothesis is that seasonal swings in sunlight disrupts our circadian rhythm, the biological clock that determines when we wake and when we sleep. Modern, sunless offices can exacerbate this effect, as can living in northern climates. For instance, some studies estimate that up to 25% of Alaskans suffer from some sort of SAD. According to one particular study, SAD is five times more likely to strike women than men.

The Symptoms

SAD is well known for its fall and winter effects: depression, hopelessness, anxiety, loss of energy, and social withdrawal. Persons with SAD can sense a gradual onset of symptoms weeks or months before depression hits. They will find it harder to wake up in the morning relative to summer (total sleep time can increase by hours) and harder to get to work on time, and they will experience a feeling of fatigue throughout the day that worsens toward the afternoon and evening.

Dietary preferences often change---craving and eating carbohydrates, a 10-20 pound weight gain is common, and becoming much less active when compared to summer routines.

After several weeks of symptom onset, depression often arises. This is where we see a loss of interest or pleasure in a normal work and home activities and often marked by procrastination, impaired concentration and a significant decrease in social interaction. Sex drives often decrease substantially as well. In SAD, being lethargic is what is overwhelming as opposed to depressions that have anxiety as a hallmark.

The Triple Attack

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Like most forms of depression, SAD can be treated into a more manageable state. Techniques that work with most depression will affect SAD; exercise and diet control, psychotherapy, use of a light box and/or medication. Just because SAD is cyclic in nature doesn't mean that you have to suffer through it each year. The fact that it happens in a regular, predictable fashion means that we can prepare for it and weaken it while it is dormant. SAD's nebulous nature and similarity to other ailments means that it is often treated as another form of depression. That's also the good news.

As with any depression, breaking the cycle is the critical first step. If you think you struggle with SAD, the first step is get assessed by a mental health professional.

Talk Therapy

Therapy is a treatment process that uses specialized techniques of caring that have been designed to offer effective, long-lasting help for people suffering from a wide range of difficulties or help fulfill aspirations for personal growth or self-improvement. Therapy has often been called the "talking cure," since the exchange of words between the client and therapist can appear to be the most obvious form of communication that is going on. In reality, therapy can offer a much richer experience than the simple exchange of words and advice. The thoughts and feelings you share and the professional techniques the therapist uses are not nearly as important as the relationship you build together. Because the relationship with the therapist is so essential to the effectiveness of the process, it is very important that you find someone with whom you feel a comfortable connection, a therapist who makes you feel safe.

As therapy progresses and your trust in the therapist's non-judgmental acceptance of your thoughts and feelings is established, you will actually use the relationship as an opportunity to reshape significant emotional experiences and work through problems in your life. In therapy, you intentionally make yourself vulnerable to another human being and you may talk about some things that are very painful for you. However, it is the very process of trusting that it's safe to release your feelings—the good and the bad--and knowing that the therapeutic relationship permits you to safely explore deeply felt sources of conflict and dissatisfaction that will finally allow you to make lasting, positive changes in your life.

In regards to SAD, talk therapy assesses ones emotional state, while helps to lift dark and depressive thoughts/feelings. It also helps to break unwanted behavior patterns that are signature to those who are struggle with SAD.

The Light Box

Another method of treatment unique to SAD is the light box. A light box is exactly what it sounds like: a specially constructed box and light that shines the same type of light as the sun. Around 80% of patients improve their SAD with light box therapy. Patients spend 15 – 30 minutes a day in front of the light box; they often do this at work or while watching TV.

When selecting a light box, look for items designed especially for SAD. These will have a power of at least 10,000 lux, and shine light at 460 to 495 nm (nanometers). Lux is a measures the intensity of light. Your living room is lit to about 400 lux, and a very sunny

day registers about 100,000 lux. Light boxes mimic the sun's effects.

The very best light boxes emit light at exactly 479 nm, the value found to have maximum therapeutic value. Do not buy a light that is used to treat skin disorders like acne, eczema, or psoriasis. These lamps emit UV light, which is remarkably damaging to your eyes.

Some light boxes use a blue colored light at a much lower power. Though some claim that these are at least as effective or more so, research hasn't verified these claims.

Using the Light Box

To use the light, it needs to be positioned about one to three feet away. The light needs to shine into your eyes, but you should not look directly into it. Sitting it on a desk while you work on the computer is perfect. Daily sessions should start at about 15 minutes for 10,000 lux light, and gradually work up to 30 minute periods. For less powerful light boxes, treatments may be as long as two or three hours. You can do other things while taking the treatment, like office work, watching TV, or browsing the Internet.

And don't leave it on all day. Just like any form of treatment, too much can be harmful. The Mayo Clinic reports that extended periods of light box therapy can produce mania (an extreme obsession) in bipolar people. At the very least, overexposure can disrupt your circadian rhythm, causing insomnia and irritability.

Consistency is key. A light box should be regarded like any other treatment. It is best to take therapy in the morning; night sessions can disrupt sleep habits.

Medication

A variety of antidepressant drugs may help people struggling with SAD, but they require a prescription, produce various side effects and take longer to show improvement than the therapies already discussed. Light therapy and talk therapy are the first line of defense. Only when this combined treatment fails or provides only partial relief, the addition of medication is warranted.

You can contact a therapist to help screen and assess whether or not you have SAD. In this area, most cases of SAD last from September to May. Now is the time to break its hold!