



CARE's WorkLife Solutions

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Seasonal Affective Disorder

Winter is here again. For some people, the winter months trigger symptoms of depression including lack of motivation and energy, change in sleeping or eating patterns, decreased desire to engage in activities and/or feelings of hopelessness. If these symptoms occur only during the winter months and subside during the spring and summer months, you may be suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). SAD is a mood disorder associated with depression episodes and related to seasonal variations of light.

SAD was officially named in the early 1980's as a disorder due partly to changes in sunlight patterns. As seasons change, there is a shift in our "biological internal clocks" or circadian rhythm; This can cause our internal clocks to become out of synch with our daily routines. Melatonin, a sleep-related hormone secreted by the pineal gland in the brain, has been linked to SAD. This hormone, which may cause symptoms of depression, is produced at increased levels in the dark. Therefore, when the days are shorter and darker the production of this hormone increases, making January through March the months when most people suffer from SAD.

Symptoms Include:

- Regularly occurring symptoms of depression during the fall or winter months.
- Full remission from depression in the spring and summer months.
- Symptoms have occurred in the past two years, with no non seasonal depression episodes.
- Seasonal episodes substantially outnumber non seasonal depression episodes.
- A craving for sugary and/or starchy foods.

For mild symptoms of SAD, simply spending more time outdoors in the sunlight or arranging homes and workspaces to receive more sunlight, might bring relief. One study found that an hour's walk in winter sunlight was as effective as two and a half hours under bright artificial light.

More severe sufferers might require bright light therapy, known as Phototherapy. This technique has shown to suppress the brain's secretion of melatonin. Although, there have been no research findings to definitely link this therapy with an antidepressant effect, many people respond to this treatment. The device most often used today is a bank of white fluorescent lights on a metal reflector and shield with a plastic screen. If phototherapy does not alleviate or reduce SAD symptoms, antidepressants may prove effective. Discuss your options thoroughly with your primary care physician as there may be unwanted side effects to consider. In addition to these options, calling CARE's WorkLife Solutions and talking to a mental health professional is a good choice.