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Seasonal Depression (aka Winter Depression)

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Summary: Seasonal affective disorder (aka SAD, season depression or winter depression in North America) is a type of depression that occurs in the fall/winter months and is felt to be due to the lack of sunlight during those months.

What is Seasonal Depression?

"I used to really hate the winters. I'd get sad and start crying for no reason. I'd just hibernate - stop going out, sleep all the time, and couldn't stop eating carbs, and I'd gain ten pounds every winter. And then I realized that really what I had was winter depression."

Seasonal affective disorder (aka SAD, season depression or winter depression in North America) is a type of depression that occurs in the fall/winter months. It usually begins in late fall or early winter and goes away by summer, and is felt to be due to the seasonal lack of sunlight.

But doesn't everyone get a little bit down in the winter?

A lot of people do get the "winter blues", where they may feel a bit more down or sad in the winter. But with "winter blues", the symptoms don't get in the way of life like they do in winter depression.

What Does Seasonal Depression look like?

The classic symptoms of seasonal depression are:

- Mood problems such as sadness, boredom or feeling more irritable
- Increased need for sleep
- Fatigue and low energy
- Increased appetite, with cravings for carbohydrates (such as bread, pasta, sweets), which may result in weight gain
- A tendency to want to avoid social situations, as well as being more sensitive to rejection
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities

With more severe symptoms, one may also note feelings of hopelessness or helplessness.

Symptoms come back every fall and winter months (when there is less sunlight).

Sometimes it can be hard to figure out whether or not the mood problems are due to lack of sunlight or due to

other factors (because school and related stresses also start in the fall).

Do You Suspect Seasonal Depression?

If so, then see a doctor (such as a family physician or pediatrician) to make sure there aren't any medical problems (such as a hormonal imbalance) that might be causing or contributing to the depression. The doctor may recommend more specialized mental health services such as seeing a psychologist, psychiatrist or social worker.

How is Seasonal Affective Depression (SAD) Treated?

Light Therapy

Because seasonal depression is a result of less sunlight, the treatment of choice is to provide that missing light via light therapy.

- What is it? Sit in front of a special lamp (with UV filter) that can deliver a sufficiently bright light to treat depression (i.e. 5,000 to 10,000 lux of light; lux is a measure of light). You don't stare directly into the light, but rather you sit near it and do other activities such as reading, working on the computer, eating breakfast, etc.
- When? Usually in the morning.
- How long? Sit near a lightbox for 30-60 minutes a day, most often in the mornings.
- Until when? Light therapy is done during the fall/winter months, until enough daylight is available, typically in the springtime.

Significant improvement can often be seen within days.

Side effects of light therapy

When used properly, light therapy seems to have very few side effects. Side effects include eye strain, headache, fatigue, irritability and trouble sleeping at night (if light therapy is used too late in the day).

Caution is required with light therapy in people with bipolar or manic depressive disorders (due to possible risk of causing a manic episode); skin that is sensitive to light, or medical conditions that make their eyes vulnerable to light damage.

Tanning beds are not helpful for treating seasonal depression, as they provide a different type of light (i.e. UV light) that is more for tanning than for helping depression.

Self-Help and Coping with Seasonal Depression

Lifestyle strategies

- Get enough sleep.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Take advantage of natural daylight in the winter as much as possible.
- Exercise daily outdoors by going for walks during daylight hours, or other activities, and get someone to go with you. (One study showed that an hour's walk in winter sunlight was as effective as two and a half hours under bright artificial light.) (Lam, 2007)

Social strategies

- Arrange family outings and social occasions for day times and early evening in winter

Coping with strategies

- What stresses is the person under, e.g. school, work, peers, relationships. Come up with a plan to deal with these stresses.

- Get started early with light therapy or other strategies, early in the fall, before the usual onset of symptoms later in the fall/winter.
- Work strategies
    - If possible, ensure that you have an office with a window, or take frequent breaks to get exposed to outdoor light
    - If possible, ensure that you have full-spectrum lights
- Stay on a regular sleep/wake schedule on both weekdays and weekends
    - Avoid staying up late, as this disrupts your sleep schedule and biological clock
- If you are able, arrange a winter vacation in a sunny climate. This is not possible for most people though!

Counselling/therapy

Are there still troubles with mood? Consider seeing a mental health professional such as a psychologist, social worker, or psychotherapist/counselor.

Medications

Are there struggles with mood despite trying strategies, and seeing a professional? See your doctor ask about the possibility of medications such as antidepressant medications such as specific serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs).

References

Canadian Consensus Guidelines for the Treatment of Seasonal Affective Disorder, edited by Raymond Lam and Anthony Levitt, Clinical & Academic Publishing, 1999. Available also from http://www-fhs.mcmaster.ca/direct/sad.html

Lam RW, Levitt AJ, Levitan RD, et al. The CAN-SAD Study: A randomized controlled trial of the effectiveness of light therapy and fluoxetine in patients with winter seasonal affective disorder. Am J Psychiatry 2006;163:805-812.

Where to Find a Light Therapy Lamp

To find a light therapy lamp, you can visit many pharmacies and drug stores. Otherwise, you can also try contacting a light therapy lamp manufacturer directly.

Here are some Canadian manufacturers:

- Northern Light Technologies, 8971 Henri-Bourassa W., Montreal, Canada, H4S 1P7, Tel: 514-335-1763, Toll free: 1-800-263-0066, Fax: 514-335-7764
  Website: http://www.northernlighttechnologies.com
- Uplift Technologies Inc., 1-800-387-0896, 125-11 Morris Drive, Dartmouth, NS, B3B 1M2, Canada, Tel: (902) 422-0804, Fax: (902) 422-0798
  Website: http://www.day-lights.com

About this Document

Written by the eMentalHealth Team.

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