



S.A.D.

Seasonal Affective Disorder

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S.A.D. – seasonal affective disorder is a type of depression that people experience during the winter months. While many people might experience some sort of dip in their mood, energy or motivation during the darker times of years, for someone who experiences S.A.D. this can be quite severe, impacting on their ability to function and undertake day to day activities.

S.A.D. symptoms include

- Persistent low mood, feelings of sadness or even hopelessness
- Sleep disturbances – sleeping for longer, or not waking refreshed
- Decreased energy
- Loss of interest in sex and physical contact
- Lack of motivation and difficulty concentrating
- Tearfulness
- Loss of pleasure and interest in everyday activities
- An increase in appetite – particularly for carbohydrate rich foods, sometimes leading to weight gain

Many of us may experience some of these symptoms to a lesser degree during the winter. In fact, it's thought that one in five of us experience this milder form of S.A.D., often called the winter blues. Around 2% of the population experience true S.A.D. which is characterised by experiencing these symptoms for more than two weeks, and for two consecutive years. True S.A.D. is a recognised medical condition which can be debilitating. It's important to seek help so that you can receive treatment and support.

Why do we suffer from mood changes in the winter?

There are a number of physiological reasons behind the shift in mood and motivation during the winter months. Firstly, the levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin (the chemical which helps regulate mood and emotions) is higher in the summer months in most humans, while the availability of an amino acid called L-Tryptophan, which helps the body synthesise serotonin also fluctuates. The lack of day light can also result in a disruption to the body's natural body clock, particularly if we spend a lot of time indoors and don't get enough natural light. On top of that, exposure to artificial light at night, can also mess up this body clock, leaving the body confused about when to sleep and when to wake. Some people with SAD produce higher levels of melatonin during winter – the hormone that helps your body get ready for sleep. This might account for a sluggishness and sleepiness during the daytime.

What can we do to help ourselves?

If you have genuine S.A.D, it's important to see your GP and ask for help. However, whether you have S.A.D. or the winter blues, there are still some things you can do to help yourself. These fall into a few different categories.

Light therapy

Light therapy is one of the popular treatments for S.A.D. and can also be helpful for anyone experiencing the winter blues. Light therapy involves sitting in front of a special lamp on a daily basis, from between 20 minutes and 2 hours depending on the size and strength of the lamp. The light produced by the light box is designed to stimulate the sunlight that's missing during the winter months. Unfortunately, our ordinary light bulbs and fittings just aren't enough to mimic the strength of the sun. It's thought that the light in a light box increases serotonin levels, and decreases melatonin. You can purchase a light from <https://www.lumie.com/> Unfortunately, they are not available on the NHS.

**“I swear by my SAD lamp,
it really does help” - Shells**

“SAD light. All day. Saved my life” - B

Increasing exposure to daylight

Try getting outside for some natural daylight every day (or most days) regardless of the weather, preferably in the morning, or at midday, and especially on brighter days. Getting outside will not only boost your serotonin levels but also give you a chance to top up your Vitamin D levels which can also drop during the winter. Getting as much natural light during the day also helps to regulate the body's circadian rhythm, promoting sleep. If you can't get outside, open the curtains wide, sitting close to them when you can.

“I find getting out for a walk (preferably in a natural environment) first thing in the day, or before noon, helps me so much with energy, mood and balancing the circadian rhythm.” - Emma

“I am trying to make sure I get out in the morning or at lunchtime for a daily walk. At this time of year some daily sunshine, a bit of exercise, some fresh air (as much as is possible in London!) and some local greenery all helps.

Even more important to get outside every day during daylight hours.” - Emma

“I do think getting out and getting as much of what daylight there is is really important. Too many people arrive at work in the dark and leave in the dark and never get any daylight.” - Max

Good sleep hygiene

Having good sleep hygiene will also help regulate your body's natural rhythms. This includes going to bed and waking at the same time each day, keeping the room a pleasant cool temperature, limiting your intake of caffeine and alcohol, and reducing your exposure to artificial light (including mobile phones, TVs and laptops) in the evening hours, particularly for at least 30 minutes to 2 hours before you wish to sleep.

Move more

Being active can boost mood and motivation, releasing endorphins and increasing both serotonin and dopamine levels in the body. It is also one of the five ways to wellbeing. Regular physical activity can also increase your self-esteem, aid concentration and helps with sleep as well. Even better, plan to exercise outdoors during daylight hours while you can – even a walk round the block at lunchtime can make a difference.

Exercising with others can add an additional boost, increasing our feelings of connection. Research has shown that a one-hour walk a day at midday could be as helpful as light treatment for coping with the blues in the winter.

**“A walk every day outside, amongst greenery if possible
😊 - Leah**

**“Gardening, walking and a good Zumba class help me” -
Karen**

Change your perspective and embrace the winter

Cognitive behaviour therapy is the current recommended treatment for S.A.D., and works by helping you work on changing your perspective, your negative thoughts about winter, and encouraging you to seek out pleasurable activities. It's interesting to note where cultures or communities embrace the winter months, there are lower reported levels of S.A.D.

Hygge is the Danish concept of finding comfort, cosiness, pleasure and warmth in cherishing the small things in life. This might include spending time with friends and family, or simple acts such as lighting a candle and making a brew. Danish winters are notoriously long and dark, so they know what they're talking about

“Last year I decided to hygge and bought candles & fairy lights & used them from October onwards & that worked well 😊 - Sam

“Actively enjoying cosiness - i.e. lighting candles/fire, warm socks, favourite hot drink etc. Having a seasonal altar for creative/spiritual inspiration. - Leah

“Don't fight against it, we follow a natural cycle. I burrow in, cosy blankets warm baths, cinema visits, hot drinks - Karen

Seeking out positive activities (and connecting with others)

It's important to seek out positive activities when you can, even if you might not feel like it. This might include making dates to catch up with friends; positive social relationships are really important for our wellbeing, and act as a buffer against mental ill health. Make an effort to stay in touch with friends and family and accept invitations even if you don't feel like going. You can always leave early if you don't enjoy it, but give yourself a chance to see if it helps first.

Other positive activities might include joining a class or course, or taking up gardening. Keeping the mind active with a new interest can be a good distraction and improve your sense of wellbeing. Other positive activities which can boost mental health include keeping a regular gratitude diary, and spending time out in nature. Spending at least two hours a week in nature has been shown in a study to promote health and wellbeing.

“Gardening is incredibly helpful because if you plant spring bulbs and you can see things coming up it gives you that hope that sunny days are round the corner!”

“Gardening, making plans for seeds and veg etc when you can't get outside. Also, trying to find the sunlight memories”

“I actively seek out more yellow in my life, yellow flags, ornaments, food, knitting” - Margaret

“Sign up to a series of community art classes, such as OT Creative Space in Old Trafford, or check out the WEA, which runs adult education classes. Essentially observing/drawing and painting nature helps me to get through the winter” - Nicola

Meditation

Regular meditation practice can help you tap into a sense of calm, and change your relationship to the thoughts that might be reinforcing negative beliefs about winter. Try one of these short practices:

<https://soundcloud.com/mindfulmarch/five-minute-body-scan>

<https://soundcloud.com/mindfulmarch/breathing-space-meditation>

“Mindfulness, Gratitude practice are what helps me” - G.

Food/diet

A healthy diet will help to boost mood, and regulate your energy levels, as well as stop you putting on weight in the winter months. If you have strong carbohydrate cravings, see if you can choose wholegrains over simple carbohydrates, and include plenty of fresh vegetables (particularly dark leafy vegetables), and some fruit.

It might also help to take a vitamin D supplement. Around 10 million people in the UK are likely to be deficient in this essential vitamin.

Some foods may have mood boosting effects such as those rich in omega-3 (salmon, or flax for example). Diets high in B12 and the omega-3 fatty acids may decrease depression and include mood. Oily fish is a good source of omega-3s, or if you're vegetarian, hemp, chia seeds or seaweed are good choices. Make sure you stay well hydrated with plenty of water and herb teas.

Resources

- Samaritans Free 24 Hour helpline all year round. Tel: [116 123](tel:116123)
- Mind [03001233393](tel:03001233393) or Text SHOUT to [85258](tel:85258)
- CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably) [0800 58 58 58](tel:0800585858) (supports men)
- Young Minds. Tel: [0808 802 5544](tel:08088025544)
- PAPYRUS (Prevention Of Young Suicide) Tel: [0800 068 41 41](tel:08000684141) (9am-12am)
- The Trevor Project (LGBTQ under 25) Text START to [678678](tel:678678)
- Manchester Mind manchestermind.org
- NHS www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters

Getting Help

See your GP

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