

Lakewood Counseling and Career Center

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RECOGNIZING AND ADDRESSING SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

By Brian Ross

Let me start this article with a disclaimer:

“I am not a doctor in real life, nor do I pretend to play one on television.”

All kidding aside.... If you are unsure about dietary changes, by all means ask your doctor. If you feel extremely sad or depressed, consult a doctor or a counselor.

There, now with that said, let's talk about SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder). Some professionals actually believe that almost everyone experiences seasonal shifts in their mood. The question being, how severe is your mood shift during the long, cold, dark days of winter?

SAD is characterized by the same symptoms that depression is. The most recognizable symptoms being; general sadness, tiredness, increases or decreases in weight, difficulty sleeping and difficulty concentrating and focusing. The main differences between depression and SAD are that SAD symptoms are generally a bit less severe, and SAD symptoms usually show up in December or January and begin to subside in April or May.

Let's talk a little bit about the differences between SAD and depression in the brain. Depression is a condition caused by one of two things. Some people are depressed because life is sad at this time. Loss or pain or other situational factors can make a person situationally depressed. Other depressed people have a brain that is having a hard time regulating a chemical that regulates pleasure called serotonin. These folks are called clinically depressed. Many of us know people who take medications such as Prozac or Paxil. These are medications that increase the serotonin in the brain, reducing depression. With SAD, the culprit is again most likely serotonin. Unlike clinically depressed people, their serotonin problems are not because their brain simply can't produce enough, but a rather more complicated relationship. The main characters are:

Tryptophan + Melatonin + Serotonin

Let's look at the three parts one at a time:

Tryptophan

Tryptophan is an essential amino acid. We have twenty amino acids that our bodies either ingest or produce. Of the twenty, eight are essential. Our bodies do not produce tryptophan. We get it by eating such foods as meats, dairy products, avocados, nuts, fish, and barley. Tryptophan does three things, in this order:

1. Repairs and maintains the body and its systems.
2. Is an essential element in the production of serotonin.
3. Excess tryptophan is turned into energy and fat.

Melatonin

There is a little gland in the brain called the Pineal Gland. Melatonin is a neurochemical (so is serotonin) that is produced in the Pineal. Melatonin is produced in large amounts when it is dark out, and almost not at all when it is light out. Melatonin helps us to sleep. The Pineal Gland must have enough serotonin to make melatonin.

Serotonin

Serotonin is produced all over the brain. It is believed to help us regulate emotions, pain, behavior, and sleep. As the neurochemical believed to manage emotions, not enough serotonin is widely believed to cause or contribute to feelings of depression, including those we feel if we have SAD.

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Is the relationship between these three and seasonal affective disorder clear? If it is, you should be a doctor. All the research done so far has yet to come up with a clear equation leading to Seasonal Affective Disorder. What doctors do seem to be in agreement on is the necessity of addressing tryptophan, serotonin, and melatonin levels simultaneously for the best results because they are so closely related.

How to help yourself feel better!

Light seems to be the single most important component is controlling SAD (that's why we don't get it in the summer – plenty of light). Try the following:

- Maximize your summer. Stay out as long as possible, way into the fall.
- Read, exercise, shovel, meditate, DO ANYTHING outside all winter long. Natural light is 2 ½ times stronger than manmade.
- Keep window shades open and lights on in the house.
- If necessary, purchases a light box to sit next to during the shortest days.

Sleep is also extremely important. Stick to the following simple rules:

- 8-9 hours each night. No more and no less.
- Go to bed and arise as close to the same times each day (including weekends!).
- NO NAPS!
- Avoid sleep aids

Eating is extremely important as well. Sweets and simple carbs (anything that does not say “whole grain”) are very attractive to people with SAD. They promise quick energy, and follow with a trip down in the dumps.

- Four or five small meals a day helps to keep energy levels high.
- Eat lots of proteins and natural fats (lean is best). Keep the barbecue out all winter. It provides an outdoor session, and is great for chicken or fish.
- No simple carbs; veggies are better than fruits, only whole grains.
- Always, always eat fat and protein for breakfast. Eat breakfast as early in the day as you can.
- Lots of water, but limit your caffeine and alcohol.

EXERCISE!!! Do it outside.

Each of the above, will in its own way, help to regulate your delicate system during the long, cold and dark days of the winter. One of the most encouraging findings that studies seem to show is that SAD sufferers can do a lot to help themselves. Have a good winter. Here it comes!