

Weathering the Winter BLUES

For many of us, fewer daylight hours and colder temperatures associated with this time of year signal more than just a change in the season. As fall and winter set in, we may observe a change in our mood, as well.

If you notice that you don't quite feel like yourself during colder months and feel better or back to normal during the warmer ones (or vice versa), you may be experiencing what is known as seasonal affective disorder (SAD). SAD is a type of depression that's initiated by a seasonal change which comes and goes around the same time each year.

Signs and symptoms

The symptoms of SAD may be mild at first, worsen as the season progresses, and then wane as the next one approaches. Indicators of depression associated with winter-pattern SAD may include:

- Feeling sad or down most of the day, nearly every day
- Isolation from friends and family
- Overeating/weight gain
- Appetite changes, particularly a craving for high-carb foods
- Oversleeping/trouble waking up in the morning
- Daytime fatigue (lethargy or low energy)
- Lack of interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Difficulty concentrating
- Stress and anxiety
- Feeling irritable, hopeless, worthless, or guilty
- Having thoughts of not wanting to live



Tips for managing seasonal blues

Plan for the pattern

If you know that SAD affects you each year, gear up for it ahead of time with a proactive plan. Decide how you'll stay engaged with others and identify outlets for keeping busy with activities you enjoy.

Maximize the daylight

One of the main causes of SAD is a lack of sun exposure, so take advantage of daylight as much as possible to help alleviate symptoms. Go for a midday walk, eat lunch outside, move your desk closer to a window, or take a phone call outside. If the weather is not on your side, consider purchasing a sun therapy lamp.

Eat well

While the foods we often encounter this time of year may tempt you with the promise of comfort, they can also lead to overeating and inadvertently feed your symptoms of SAD. Try healthier versions of your favorite recipes or take advantage of the seasonal fruits and veggies. You can also avoid overindulging by eating something healthy at home before attending a food-filled holiday party.

Stay active

It's easy to want to stay cozy and warm indoors when it's cold outside, but too much inactivity can contribute to your SAD symptoms. Take up a hobby, volunteer, or take in the holiday lights on foot with friends and family. You can also change up your workout routine for the winter by going to the gym at a different time of day or diving into seasonal activities like sledding or ice skating.

Maintain connections

SAD symptoms can increase when you keep yourself closed off from others. Prevent the risk of isolation and boost your mood by spending time with friends and family when you can. Organize a game night with your family or join a volunteer group. Check in on your friends with a phone call or drop by to bring them some homemade soup. It's also important to open up to others about how you're feeling. You're not alone in your struggle with SAD and it can help to talk through it and get support from others.

Get professional support. Seasonal affective disorder is typically temporary and can be managed. If, however, you find that your symptoms get worse or persist beyond the changing of seasons, you're no longer able to do daily activities, or you have overwhelming feelings of hopelessness and despair, you may want to seek professional help from your doctor or a therapist. If you or someone you know is contemplating suicide, please call the 24/7 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988 or the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) right away.

The EAP is also here to provide emotional support whenever you need it. Licensed counselors are available 24/7, even on holidays. Call any time, day or night, to speak with someone who can provide guidance and support to help you work through your symptoms.

Additional resources

National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH)

nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/seasonal-affective-disorder

nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression

MentalHealth.gov

mentalhealth.gov/what-to-look-for/mood-disorders/sad

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

samhsa.gov

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

988lifeline.org

Call or text 988

The EAP is a voluntary and confidential employee benefit available to eligible federal employees at no cost.

24
HOURS
A DAY

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