

UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER



Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, is a form of depression that occurs during a specific time of year, usually the winter, although some report having SAD in the summer. Symptoms of SAD usually begin in October or November and continue until March or April, with the worst symptoms being in the darkest months. Reduced sunlight can cause a drop in serotonin, a brain chemical that affects mood, and can trigger depression. For those already struggling with depression it can increase the symptoms.

With shorter days and longer nights in the fall and winter, our circadian rhythm that helps regulate the body's internal clock may be affected. In prolonged darkness, levels of the hormone melatonin will increase, making us more prone to sleep and depression. When sunlight is reduced, serotonin is reduced, which can lead to depression. The "winter blues" are less severe than Seasonal Affective Disorder. "Winter blues" last a shorter time and are not associated with the hopeless, low feelings that are associated with SAD.

Most SAD sufferers experience normal mental health most of the year, but experience depressive symptoms in the winter. SAD is more common in northern geographic regions, especially arctic regions due to the effects of polar nights. It is thought that 6 out of every 100 people in the United States may experience SAD. Reportedly, another 10% -20% may experience some mild form of SAD. It is reported to be more common in women than men, and the average age that people usually begin to be affected is surprisingly young at 23. Those with SAD may be more likely to have blood relatives with the condition. SAD is a serious disorder, sometimes triggering dysthymia or clinical depression. Winter onset symptoms include: depression, hopelessness, anxiety, loss of energy, heavy, "leadens" feeling in the arm or legs, social withdrawal, oversleeping, loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed, appetite changes, especially craving food high in carbohydrates, weight gain, and difficulty concentrating.

Take signs and symptoms of SAD seriously, as it can get worse and lead to problems if it is not treated. These can include: suicidal thoughts or behaviors, social withdrawal, school or work problems, and substance abuse. It is very important to see your doctor if you feel you may be struggling with these symptoms to see if you may need temporary medication to help you maintain through the difficult months. It is equally important to seek mental health treatment to talk with someone and to learn skills to help you work through the symptoms and feel better. If you experience depression all year round it is important also to see your doctor and seek mental health services to learn the skills needed to better manage your emotions and have the life you want.

Although Seasonal Affective Disorder can impact adults of all ages, lifestyle can contribute to the course of the condition. Isolation, a family history of depression, or the recent loss of a loved one can increase the risk of SAD in the elderly. Living in a nursing home, having restricted mobility, or being homebound, the elderly will likely receive less natural sunlight exposure. Reportedly, cold, dark winter months can aggravate chronic conditions and medication.

The holiday season can also be a very difficult time for the elderly, especially when Seasonal Affective Disorder and grief occur. Usually it is a time filled with joy and hopefulness, reminding us of our childhood. If you lost a loved one in the last year it can be emotionally exhausting with a deep sense of someone missing, and it can renew feelings of grief with a great intensity. Combined with the winter months of increased darkness, cloudy skies, and cold damp weather, it can result in causing Seasonal Affective Disorder and an increased sense of loss and abandonment during this time of year.

MANAGING YOUR SYMPTOMS AT HOME:

- Practice good sleep habits.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Take medication as prescribed and learn how to manage side effects.
- Learn to watch for early signs that your depression is getting worse.
- Try to exercise more often.
- Look for activities that make you happy.
- Avoid alcohol and illegal drugs. These can make depression worse over time.
- Talk with someone you can trust about how you are feeling.
- Try to be around people who are caring and positive.
- Volunteer or get involved in group activities.

Cana Counseling at Catholic Charities is a full-service counseling and mental and behavioral health program with locations in Wichita and Hutchinson. The program accepts Medicare and Medicaid and most commercial insurances, as well as private pay clients on a sliding fee scale.

For more information contact Cana Counseling at Catholic Charities, (316) 263-6941, or toll free at 1-866-839-4327 or visit www.canacounseling.org.



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