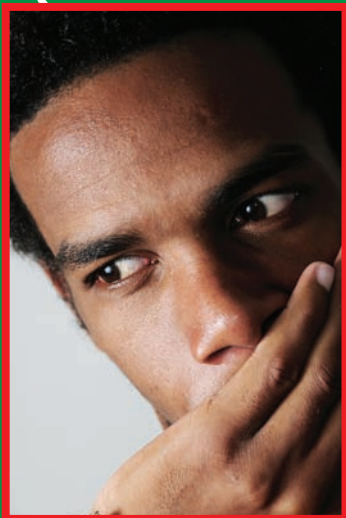


Tis the Season



To Be



Sad
???



This time of year can bring to us much more than the joy and peace that the season promises. For many, the winter months can feel much more like a dark and depressing time of year regardless of any holiday festivities in which we might engage.

Seasonal Affective Disorder—appropriately referred to as “SAD”—affects up to 50% of individuals in the continuous United States. Formally speaking, SAD is defined as a regular, temporal onset of depressive episodes at particular times of the year, with full remission of these symptoms at other characteristic times of the year. In other words, there is a “seasonal” pattern to your emotional ups and downs. Up to 20% of individuals experience mild symptoms while others seem to manifest the full range of emotional and physical effects.

There are a myriad of symptoms related to SAD:

Sleep disturbance (oversleeping but not feeling refreshed, daytime drowsiness, requirement of afternoon naps);

Depression (feelings of despair, misery, guilt, hopelessness, withdrawal, irritability, upset mood, constant sadness);

Lethargy (decreased energy, effort in every activity, decreased productivity);

Physical ailments (joint pain, stomach problems, lowered resistance, worsened PMS symptoms);

Behavioral problems (increased appetite, carbohydrate craving, loss of interest in sex, difficulty concentrating).

The biggest challenge with SAD is distinguishing it from other forms illnesses.

True or False: SAD only affects people in the winter months....

False. Although the majority of people experience their “SADness” during the winter months, there are also those who actually tolerate the summer months much less in terms of their emotional and physical well-being. However, it is true that the higher the latitude that we live in, the more likely we are to be impacted by SAD. In fact, if you drew a line across the upper 1/4th of the United States, up to 60% of those who live above that line would admit to significant levels of SAD. This adds to the recognition that SAD is strongly related to the availability of light during the day. During the summer vs. winter, the availability of sun is 100,000 lux units (light units) vs. 30,000 lux respectively. So, the higher the latitude, the worse the ‘attitude’.

Can SAD be as severe and serious as other forms of Major Depressive Disorder?

A resounding “yes”. In fact, it is not uncommon for SAD to be mistaken for a purely major depressive disorder and treated accordingly without regard to the impact the season has had. A seemingly tough-to-treat depression could actually be related to a misdiagnosis that wasn’t screened for SAD. Although the treatment for SAD may include the use of antidepressant medication, this could be avoided completely if the depressive episode was identified as seasonal and acted upon naturally.

Is there a family history for people with SAD?

No. This is one of the markers for the difference between SAD and a general depressive disorder. If depression occurs in a person without a family history, they should first be screened for situational events that may have caused the depression then establish the likelihood of a season pattern. Depressive disorders are all too often lumped together without doing a comprehensive assessment of the factors that caused the depression. If a medical professional treats the depressive symptoms without the awareness of SAD, they may very likely delay and complicate treatment for a naturally-occurring seasonal fluctuation of mood. As with all medication used for depression, meds used for SAD will only take the edge of the symptoms off—they will not take the actual problems away. If left unrecognized as SAD, patients can experience unnecessary ups and downs throughout their lives.

Are younger or older people more affected by SAD?

Younger. However, SAD rarely affects those under the age of 20. Because all forms of depression seem to magnify issues or problems that already exist, it could be that adults are more affected since we tend to have more unresolved 'baggage' anyway. Also, because SAD is related to the amount of light units that enter the eyes, it could be that SAD does not manifest until the eyes and brain are fully developed and 'wired' for a predisposition to SAD.

True or False: SAD only affects people who have good eyesight.

False. Although scientists are still at a loss to fully under-

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stand SAD, it is known that SAD is related to the amount of light units entering the eye—not the amount of sunlight that reaches the skin. Interesting to note is that blind individuals can have positive results from exposure to light, which although good for these individuals, it creates even more of a mystery for scientists striving to understand the disorder. Many theories exist for SAD including a lowered pineal function during winter months which shifts our rhythmic cycles. Hypothalamus theories suggest that lower light exposure to our retinas shifts our body clock functions. Also, because low Vitamin D levels have also been linked to depression, this could add another factor since we don't tend to get as much outdoor time during the winter months. In other words, it is likely a combination of all of these things that create the SAD effect.

The good news is there are many natural ways to improve a seasonally-influenced mood without the use of medication—or as adjunct to treating persistent depression.

Light Exposure. The combination of outdoor activity and

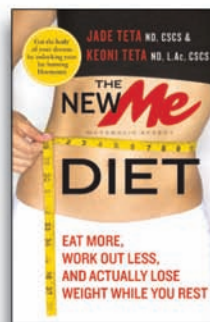
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exposure to sunlight can be a very helpful 'treatment' for SAD. As little as 20 minutes of exposure to natural sunlight can prove helpful; however, the typical "dosage" when formally diagnosed with SAD is 20 minutes to 2 hours. This can be accomplished by spending time outside without tinted lenses/sun glasses, or by spending time in front of a specially purchased light therapy box. Neither case requires direct exposure into the eyes—rather, it is the reflection of light into the eye that creates the therapeutic effect. Therefore, going for a walk, raking leaves, or reading in an area of light exposure will do the trick. In countries where there

is less sunlight in winter months, 'light cafes' attract regular customers to get their daily "dose" of light therapy.

Exercise. Although hibernating bears don't go out of their way to get daily physical activity, for us, some form of cardiovascular activity can quickly boost a SAD-influenced mood. Only a short duration of exercise doubles the amount of serotonin in our bodies--- therefore, it can quickly and naturally boost a person's mood.

Sleep. SAD seems to create the tendency to want to sleep more. However,

it is more effective and important to maintain your normal sleep schedule rather than give into the sleepiness. Too much sleep can actually exacerbate the SAD effect.

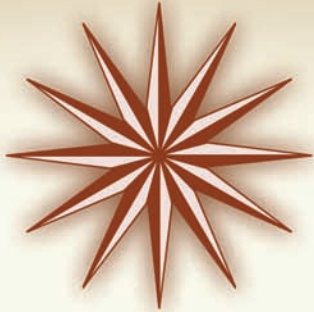
Socialize. Like any other form of depression, a good dose of social time can be extraordinarily helpful in keeping SAD at bay. Because isolation can become part of any depressive cycle, it is important to maintain daily contact with others.

Drink your milk. Milk contains a form of Vitamin D called solatriol that helps you keep in sync with the sun. Many folks avoid the sun at all cost these days due to the scare of skin cancer, which unfortunately also lowers our natural Vitamin D production. Consuming milk and other dairy products enriched with Vitamin D can help to prevent the occurrence of SAD.


Turn on your 'internal light'. Consider your experience of SAD to be a "wake-up call" to problems and concerns that were likely there to begin with, but now seem magnified. Without our experience of influences like SAD, we often overlook our problems. Instead of SAD turning your world to darkness, it might just shed some light on issues that need to be resolved anyway. Take it as an opportunity to address the issues once and for all.

Seasonal Affective Disorder does not have to create a sad time of the year for you. In fact, it is one of the easiest emotional syndromes to be treated naturally—and cheaply. It only takes a bit of conscious awareness of your seasonal cycle to identify and thus prevent the SAD effect. Take stock in how your emotional patterns fall within the seasons, then create a plan to both prevent and resolve a "SAD" experience for yourself.

Dr. Katherine T. Kelly is a licensed psychologist in private practice in Winston-Salem. For more information regarding her speaking schedule or for her monthly newsletter, go to www.drkatherinetkelly.com. She can also be reached at 336-723-1011.



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