

Splurge - Volume 8 Issue 1 (January 2013)

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SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

Winter in Kansas is typically known for grey days, blustery winds and long nights. As we move from summer into fall, the days grow shorter and light is in scarce supply. Outdoor fun suddenly moves indoors with chapped lips, hot tea and often more sedentary activities. Many of us spend more time alone; we gain weight or fall off our fitness routine. I often hear people become more contemplative in the winter.

For many people, though, winter can bring more than just the blahs. Patients diagnosed with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) struggle each year with the onset of symptoms that seriously hinder their daily lives.

SAD is thought to be triggered by the shortened days, restricted light and generally one's biorhythms in accordance with the environment. Some people have a history of depression but often people with SAD are bipolar or experience other forms of depression or mood disorder. However, it's important to identify and treat the symptoms because other problems can manifest if left untreated.

The following symptoms usually build up slowly over the fall and winter months. Symptoms of this disorder are:

- Increased appetite and weight gain
- Hopelessness
- Increased sleep and disrupted sleep patterns
- Sluggish movements
- Social withdrawal
- Loss of interest in work or hobbies
- Lack of energy / fatigue
- Lack of ability to concentrate
- Unhappiness and irritability

Left untreated, these symptoms can compound and lead to long-term clinical depression; thoughts of suicide and manic depression are possibilities. Often, a person with these symptoms tends to "self-medicate" with alcohol, excessive food or recreational drugs. These only exacerbate the presenting issue and are to be avoided if at all possible.

The most recommended form of treatment that has shown promise is light treatment. Studies show that light treatment has an uplifting effect on those with SAD and even 15 minutes per day can make a giant difference. Light therapy mimics outdoor light and appears to cause a change in brain chemicals linked to mood. Light therapy is one of the first line treatments for seasonal affective disorder. It generally starts working in two to four days and causes few side effects.

There are drug treatments known to help with SAD, including Wellbutrin (or, bupropion), a common antidepressant. When treating a patient with a history of depression from SAD, they usually start treatment a few weeks prior to the onset of fall months, in order to minimize the severity of symptoms. Paired with exercise, healthy diet and continued social interaction, medication can be a much-needed boost to keeping mood and mental clarity high, and maintaining one's physical health throughout the year.

Psychotherapy is always on the treatment list and can be lifesaving. A mental health professional or physician familiar with depression and SAD can be immensely helpful in diagnosing, monitoring and alleviating symptoms. When depression sinks in, many people's minds become closed to possibilities and forget the vitality and variety of their lives. Therapists can help navigate those waters and find hope again. Plus, it's always good to talk to someone who has your best interests in mind.

If at any time you experience suicidal thoughts or you are thinking that life is too hard to take, please call a friend, family member, doctor or even a suicide hotline. Sometimes it's easier to talk to a stranger, and professional counselors are trained to help you through times of crisis.

One of the things I love best about living in Kansas is the seasons. I love the delineations of time, vegetation, sunlight and weather. If we know one thing as people who live in a seasonal state, things always change – sometimes in an infamously Kansan way. (40 degrees swings in 24 hours? We've seen it!) Always know that the world turns and the world needs you in it. Never despair and be sure to keep in mind that you needn't suffer alone.

Suicide hotline: 1-800-273-8255.

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