

Surviving the Winter blues



BY REGISTERED COUNSELLOR AND PSYCHOTHERAPIST SHARON HINSULL.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a recognised form of depression that can strike at any time of year but is most typically associated with the darker winter months. Whilst there is no definitive cause of SAD, several factors can potentially contribute to the condition, including seasonal fluctuations in the hormones that affect an individual's circadian rhythm or natural body clock.

It is widely believed that a lack of exposure to natural daylight can be a significant factor in the development of seasonal depression, which is why many people who are diagnosed with SAD find that using light therapy can be a helpful part of their treatment.



Somewhere in the region of two million people in the UK are believed to experience the symptoms of SAD, and whilst the condition can strike at any time of year, winter usually tends to be its most prevalent season, with geographical location also playing a part.

Recent research undertaken by health and wellbeing company YorkTest revealed that Scotland, Wales and London are ranked amongst the most common areas in which people are likely to succumb to episodes of seasonal depression.



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WARNING SIGNS

Many of the symptoms associated with SAD are similar to those experienced with other forms of depression. Some of the likely signs that a person may be suffering from SAD include:

- feeling sad, tearful or hopeless
- having little or no energy
- feeling anxious or worried
- finding it hard to concentrate
- being unable to enjoy things that usually bring you pleasure
- losing interest in sex
- not wanting to see people
- feeling despairing or suicidal

In addition to these symptoms, a person may typically feel sleepy during the day and find it hard to get up in the morning. There might also be noticeable changes to a person’s appetite, such as craving food that is high in carbohydrates.



“DARKER WINTER MONTHS CAN OFTEN MAKE IT MORE CHALLENGING”

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PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

Lee Chambers, an Environmental Psychologist and Wellbeing Consultant at Essentialise, says that taking steps to mitigate the impact of the changing seasons can go a long way in helping to reduce the symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder.

“We are still in the early days of understanding the complexity of SAD, but we know that it is intrinsically linked to our light exposure, biorhythms and hormone levels. With that in mind, the ways we can reduce our susceptibility to SAD is to consider getting light therapy to stimulate our serotonin production in the morning and to get outside during natural light hours where we can.

“Ensuring you get as much natural light into the room you are working from is also beneficial while getting out in nature can also help to boost our mood and protect us against stressors. Exercising is another way to promote mental wellbeing while eating a nutritious diet is essential as most of our serotonin production is in our gut.”

SEASONAL SELF-CARE

The darker winter months can often make it more challenging to get motivated to go out and about and be physically active. However, research consistently shows that exercising outdoors can be one of the most helpful strategies for combating low mood.

With the added challenge of the shorter hours of natural daylight at this time of year, spending as much time outdoors is especially important to give our serotonin levels a much-needed seasonal boost.

SEEKING HELP AND SUPPORT

If you are experiencing a recurring low mood this winter, try to speak with someone about it as soon as you possibly can. There are a range of treatment options available for SAD, including light therapy, talking therapies and antidepressant medication. Your GP should be able to recommend or refer you to the most suitable course of treatment for your needs. Whilst this form of depression may be relatively transient, as long as the symptoms persist, the impact of SAD can be extremely debilitating, so it's essential to seek appropriate help and advice at the earliest opportunity.





“IT'S ESSENTIAL TO SEEK APPROPRIATE HELP AND ADVICE AT THE EARLIEST OPPORTUNITY”

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ORGANISATIONS OF SUPPORT

The **Seasonal Affective Disorder Association** provides information and guidance on the various treatment options for SAD and updates on the latest research into the condition. sada.org.uk

CALM is the Campaign Against Living Miserably for men aged 15 to 35. The organisation runs a free, confidential and anonymous helpline and a web chat service, offering help, advice and information to anyone struggling or in crisis. thecalmzone.net

Men's Health Forum provides round-the-clock stress support

for men by text, chat and email. menshealthforum.org.uk/howru-hub

Samaritans provides free, confidential, around-the-clock support on 116 123. samaritans.org

SHOUT is a free 24/7 text service available to anyone in the UK. Text 'SHOUT' to 85258 and speak in confidence with a trained volunteer. giveusashout.org

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