



Overcoming Seasonal Depression

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Julia gets depressed in the winter. She just turned 27 and, for years, she has experienced greater sadness in December, January and February than any other months of the year. During the winter months, she eats more, sleeps more, and has less energy. Furthermore, every winter, she craves sugary foods and gains weight.

Larry, at age 32, gets what he calls the “winter blues” and has noticed this the past few years. In the cold weather months, he needs more sleep and, like Julia, he eats more sugary foods and gains weight.

Both have a problem with seasonal affective disorder (SAD). Julia has it the worst while Larry has a mild case.

By the Numbers

There seems to be a genetic influence in SAD as it is somewhat more likely in those who have a family history of depression. Oddly enough, there also seems to be a linkage with a family history of alcoholism.

Research suggests that between 4 to 6 percent of the general population experience SAD, with some studies showing this rate as high at 10%. Another 10 to 20 percent of us have partial SAD features. Also, women with SAD out-number men four to one. SAD is most often initially diagnosed in the young twenties, and the risk decreases with age. The prevalence rate in children is lower, between 2 - 5%.

SAD is a diagnosable psychiatric disorder. The symptoms include:

- Recurring symptoms of depression (sadness, excessive sleeping and eating, and weight gain) during the fall or winter months.
- Full remission from depression in spring and summer months
- The same depressive pattern during the past two years with no non-seasonal episodes of depression
- A craving for sugary and/or starchy foods

While not everyone meets the criteria for a diagnosis, there's reason to suspect that all of us experience some seasonal affective pattern.

For one thing, we all have a similar hormonal response to the winter season. During winter there's less sunlight in the day than during the spring or summer. This increased darkness each day may cause our internal clocks or circadian rhythm to be out of step with our daily activities. The reason? When it's dark our brains produce greater quantities of the hormone melatonin. As you might expect, this hormone slows us down and helps us to sleep. It depresses many biologic functions.

Scientists don't have an explanation for SAD, except that it's a form of depression, and is seasonally triggered. One promising area of research showed a decreased retinal sensitivity to light in SAD patients.

Self-Help for SAD

Here are some methods that have a good track record in helping individuals with SAD:

- **Light Therapy.** This is one of the most promising therapies for SAD. You simply spend more of your time under bright lights. But note, the light should be very bright, about 10,000 lux, which is 70 times brighter than normal room lighting. The light should be above you and your eyes should be open, but you don't want to stare into the light. When using light with this intensity, an appropriate daily treatment can be as little as 30 minutes. Studies show that this treatment is effective with about 75% of SAD sufferers. To use this treatment, you'll have to obtain a lighting system that produces that level of brightness. At one time it was thought that full spectrum lighting was necessary, but it has been shown that brightness is more helpful. Tanning beds do not help as they have high amounts of ultra-violet light, which is dangerous to the eyes.
- **Get more natural sunlight.** Even though the weather is cold, spend more time outside in bright daylight. One study found that an hour's walk in the sun was as effective as two and a half hours under bright artificial light. Also, arrange your home or workplace to receive more sunlight.
- **Manage your diet.** Although you might be craving sweets more than ever, you can do yourself a big favor by not giving in. In the book *Sugar Blues*, William Dufty showed a link between excessive sugar consumption and depression. One way to control your cravings is to go for the complex carbohydrates (whole grains such as wheat, oats, and rice) instead of the simple carbohydrates (sugar foods). Also, try eating fruit to satisfy your cravings for sweets.
- **Counseling or medication.** For those with serious bouts of depression, you may benefit from short-term counseling or medication. One or the other, or both, can help you turn things around.

There are some other actions you might consider that are helpful for general depression:

- **Exercise.** An aerobic workout can reduce the symptoms of depression. To be considered aerobic, you need to stay in constant motion with your exercise for at least 30 minutes. A brisk walk works very well. Also, of course, there's running, swimming, and aerobic exercise classes
- **Manage your stress.** The anxiety produced by increased stress is one of the factors in depression. By reducing your stress, you can remove this factor.

Studies show that the two toughest months for those with seasonal affective disorder are January and February. As January approaches this year, you can be prepared to reduce or overcome many of the symptoms.

Rich Bayer, Ph.D., is the CEO of Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services, Inc. and a practicing psychologist.

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