

BEYOND SAD

Understanding the signs and seeking help for Seasonal Depression

A less common but more serious form of Seasonal Affective Disorder, how those who suffer from Seasonal Depression can recognize serious symptoms, and where to find help.

It's that time of year again, when many of us feel as though our get up and go has got up and gone.

As colder weather sets in and the number of hours of sunlight dwindles down, many of us begin to feel a change in our moods, energy levels, and appetite. This shift is a direct result of the loss of sunlight. Our [circadian rhythms](#) — in other words, our internal clocks — are negatively impacted by the diminished quality and quantity of sunlight.

While not everyone feels less alive, tends to become less active, and less willing to venture outdoors, the vast majority of people living in the northern hemisphere tend to feel this shift, and start to slow down in the Fall. The good news is that with the growing awareness of the signs and symptoms of [Seasonal Affective Disorder](#) (SAD), people are better able to manage their symptoms.

Symptoms are a call to action

Whatever symptoms we are experiencing, they demand our attention. Symptoms serve as built-in alarm system, and a call to action. They compel us to pay attention to our health and well-being when we are under threat, or something is shifting or changing.

SAD [symptoms](#) include occasional feelings of depression, a general lack of interest, low energy, difficulty concentrating, disruptions in sleep routines, weight gain due to changes in appetite, and social withdrawal. Employing a range of targeted self-care strategies, like using a 'lightbox' that provides many of the benefits of exposure to sunlight, getting out into the mid-day sun, paying attention to dietary choices, practicing good sleep hygiene (including limiting exposure to blues screens and electronic devices before bedtime, and sticking to regular sleep and wake times), making an effort to connect with others rather than isolate, enables most people impacted by SAD and the winter blues to manage their symptoms through the winter months.

For a minority of sufferers with more severe symptoms of Seasonal Depression, self-care alone is not enough.

Defining Seasonal Depression

Less common — and far more debilitating — than SAD, Seasonal Depression is a deep, debilitating form of depression. Seasonal Depression shares the same symptomology as a [Major Depressive Disorder](#) (MDD), including feelings of sadness, irritability, a loss of interest in activities and pursuits that bring joy, and ideation of suicide and self-harm. Symptoms of Seasonal Depression are present most of the time, for at least two weeks. The unique feature of Seasonal Depression is that it occurs as a seasonal pattern.

While more common during the Fall and Winter, Seasonal Depression can also occur during the Summer months.

Unlike milder seasonal patterns of winter blues and SAD, for people experiencing Seasonal Depression, self-care strategies alone are not enough.

Seeking treatment

Symptoms of Seasonal Depression differ from those of SAD in terms of their severity and manageability. They are more difficult, and overwhelming than those of SAD. [Diagnosing Seasonal Depression](#) may include a physical examination, blood tests, [neuro-transmitter testing](#), and a psychological evaluation.

Treatment options include talk therapy and medications — alone or in combination — and have proven effective in treating Seasonal Depression. A 2023 [study](#) identifies [Cognitive Behavioral Therapy \(CBT\)](#) as effective in treating Seasonal Depression. (In CBT patients learn to identify and challenge negative thoughts and shift maladaptive behaviors to healthier, more positive, adaptive ones.) Medications, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-noradrenaline reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) are also helpful in managing symptoms.

Light at the end of the tunnel

The good news is that timely diagnoses, along with evidence-based treatments and self-care strategies can be highly effective in help people who struggle with Seasonal Depression cope with the recurring debilitating symptoms of the winter season. Seasons change, and for those who are suffer during the winter months, Spring brings light and relief. In the meantime, it is important that we understand and address the symptoms that arise during the winter months.

WHAT YOU NEED TO DO IF YOU THINK YOU MAY BE SUFFERING FROM SEASONAL DEPRESSION

- **Reflect on recurring patterns of low moods, social withdrawal, and other symptoms:** *Do you find yourself dreading the Fall and Winter months due to previous bouts with sadness and social isolation in the past? Do you recognize a prevalence of patterns, like winter weight gain, loss of interest in life, or loss of energy during the winter months?*
- **Set an intention to attention to the symptoms you are experiencing now:** *It is critical that we pay attention to our symptoms. With an awareness of how and when SAD and Seasonal Depression manifest and play out, you can begin to see your symptoms for what they are— a call to action, to seek relief and treatment when needed. Resist the urge to ignore, downplay, or minimize your symptoms. Instead, take action.*
- **Seek the help of trained professional:** *A GP or family doctor can be the first step to diagnosis and treatment.*