



“Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Seasonal Affective Disorder

Do you, or someone you know, ever start to feel dips in your energy, become irritable, and feel down every fall? Don’t simply brush it off as the winter blues; keep reading to see if you may need to talk to someone about how you feel.

What is Seasonal Affective Disorder?

Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, is a condition that comes and goes based on seasonal changes, appearing in the fall and going away in the spring/summer. Seasonal Affective Disorder can also occur during spring and summer although it is not as common to experience SAD during the warmer seasons.

SAD is thought to be influenced by exposure to sunlight. Our bodies react to how much sun we are exposed to through our circadian rhythm. Our circadian rhythm is our natural clock that regulates many things, including mood and sleep. Exposure to sunlight may also affect chemicals in our brain (serotonin) and our body (melatonin), which also influences how we feel.

Who is at risk of developing SAD?

It is estimated that SAD makes up 10% of all reported cases of depression. Approximately 15% of Canadians will report at least a mild case of SAD in their lifetime, while 2-3% will report serious cases. People with a family history of any form of depression may also be at risk of developing SAD. Canadians are particularly at risk, as we have decreased sunlight during the winter months.

If you have a history of depression or bipolar disorder, your symptoms may become worse seasonally.

What are the symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder?

If you have SAD, you may find yourself feeling many symptoms of depression, especially irritability, and you may be more sensitive in interpersonal relationships. People often report that their energy levels are unusually low, causing them to feel tired, heavy, or lethargic. As a result, you may feel that your regular sleep schedule doesn’t provide adequate rest. Oversleeping is commonly reported in SAD.

You may find that your appetite has changed, and you may crave foods that are higher in carbohydrates, starch, and fat. Some people report weight gain, especially when you are frequently eating “comfort foods” (e.g., high calorie and fast foods). You may lose interest in activities that you once enjoyed, which may cause you to develop a more avoidant or sedentary lifestyle. Physical intimacy may appear uninteresting or too demanding. You are also likely to feel stressed, distracted, sad, guilty, or hopeless.



Can Psychology Help Seasonal Affective Disorder?

There are many ways to reduce symptoms of SAD. The most widely recommended psychotherapy for SAD is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT helps individuals focus on immediate thoughts, moods, and feelings, which allows problems to be broken down and made more manageable. Your psychologist may also recommend lifestyle changes in the winter, such as opening blinds, going outside, and exercising. You can undergo CBT either alone or in a group setting. Research suggests that CBT can help improve present symptoms while providing you with a healthy defense for future episodes.

Other forms of psychotherapy commonly used for the treatment of SAD are counselling and psychodynamic therapies. These therapies allow you to discuss concerns and worries with a therapist in an open and confident environment. You may discuss feelings about yourself and others, or past experiences that could be influencing your symptoms. One goal is to identify any memories or feelings that could be influencing your current state of mind. Once possible causes have been identified, you will work through them to resolve any negative influences presently affecting you.

Are there other treatments for Seasonal Affective Disorder?

Many studies have identified light therapy as an effective method for improving symptoms. In this therapy, the user sits in front of a special light box or lamp for approximately 30 minutes a day. Light therapy can be administered in a doctor's office, or at home with your own equipment on a schedule recommended by a clinician. You should consult with your doctor before beginning light therapy. Light therapy is not suitable for everyone as there can be negative side-effects associated with this treatment including eye strain, agitation, headaches, and nausea. Light boxes should only be purchased after a discussion with your treating professional, as not all light boxes are effective.

As mentioned above, exposure to natural light can be helpful. Research has found benefits from exposure to sunlight within one hour from waking up in the morning, particularly for people with SAD. You can sit beside a window, keep your blinds open when you are home, trim branches that block light on your property, or take frequent walks outside with proper UV protection. This can be difficult during the winter months, and you may need to consider supplementing with light therapy after a discussion with your clinician.

It is also encouraged that you live a healthy and balanced lifestyle to improve symptoms and reduce the severity of future episodes. Try incorporating exercise into your daily routine. Exercise will help increase your physical and mental well-being, ease your stress, and reduce feelings of lethargy. Eat a healthy diet and be mindful not to overindulge cravings for high sugar/starch/fatty foods. Make sure to stick to regular sleeping habits to combat fatigue and avoid oversleeping. Additionally, make sure that you have a healthy level of vitamin D in your diet with your physician and/or pharmacist.

Although your symptoms may initially make this difficult, keep in regular contact with family and friends, both in person and via electronic means. These networks can provide opportunities to socialize and



refresh your mood. Reach out to people in your support network for comfort and understanding. This can help ease feelings of guilt, isolation or hopelessness. Make sure to spend some leisure time doing activities that you find rewarding and gratifying. Practice mindfulness and pacing inside the home if you cannot make it outside (in front of windows if possible). Finally, exercise stress management techniques such as meditation and mindful breathing.

Alternatively, your physician may decide that medication, such as an antidepressant, is an effective treatment for you. Pharmacotherapy likely will be recommended for symptoms that are severe and have a significant impact on daily functioning. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are the preferred anti-depressant for treating SAD. There are side effects with medications, which should be discussed with your prescribing professional.

Where can I get more information?

- Canadian Mental Health Association (ON branch): general information about possible causes, symptoms, treatment plans: http://ontario.cmha.ca/mental_health/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad/
- American Psychological Association (APA): provides information on symptoms management and how psychologists can help: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/seasonal-affective-disorder.aspx>
- Center for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH): provides general information, as well as a short video about symptoms and treatments for SAD: http://www.camh.ca/seasonal_affective_disorder

You can consult with a registered psychologist to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial, and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, please visit: <http://www.cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations>

This fact sheet has been prepared for the Canadian Psychological Association by Sarah Amirault, Carleton University.

Date: March 2018

Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: factsheets@cpa.ca

Canadian Psychological Association
141 Laurier Avenue West, Suite 702
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5J3
Tel: 613-237-2144
Toll free (in Canada): 1-888-472-0657