

Helen Tosch

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Battling Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

The holidays are just past, the days are still short, and it often seems as if the sun is on sabbatical. That can make even the cheeriest person slow down and want to sleep a little more. But for some people, the lack of sunlight during the fall and winter can lead to feeling seriously blue and even depressed.

John Stracks, MD, Integrative Medicine Specialist at the Center for Integrative Medicine and Wellness at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, states that Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, affects many people and can make them feel depressed, fatigued and lethargic, among other things.

“SAD is a real disorder with real symptoms. It’s a type of depression that shouldn’t be ignored and can be treated. As the hours of sunlight wane during the fall and winter, good spirits don’t have to disappear with them.”

Many of Dr. Stracks’s patients prefer to steer clear of medications whenever possible, and there is evidence that alternative therapies for SAD can be at least as effective as medication alone, without the risk of side effects. Some of the treatments he recommends are the use of therapeutic light boxes, supplements and psychotherapy.

If your symptoms are mild, and you’d rather not make a trip to your doctor, there are steps you can take on your own, such as spending more time outside during the day or sitting close to bright windows when you’re inside.

Causes of SAD

The exact causes of SAD are still unknown, but there are some common theories, like changes in your body’s levels of melatonin and serotonin, or a disruption of your body’s internal clock (otherwise known as your circadian rhythm).

- **Melatonin** is a hormone that helps you sleep, but when present in high levels, it can lead to depression. When the daylight hours grow short, and you’re exposed to less and less sunlight, your melatonin levels may increase and make you feel sleepy and depressed.
- **Serotonin** is a naturally-produced brain chemical that can affect your mood. Reduced sunlight may cause a drop in your serotonin levels, which in turn may have negative effects on your mood.
- **Your circadian rhythm** is a physiological mechanism that helps your body know when to sleep and when to be awake, and it may be disrupted by the decreased sunlight during fall and winter days. Some researchers believe that this disruption may lead to depression.

Treatment Options

Light Therapy

Light therapy works by mimicking sunlight, which in turn causes a biochemical change in your brain that lifts your mood, giving you relief from the symptoms of SAD. If you think light therapy might help you, speak with your doctor about it.

Psychotherapy

Some doctors may suggest psychotherapy alone or in addition to other treatments for SAD. Although researchers believe SAD is related to biochemical changes in your body, your mood and behaviors can also contribute to the symptoms you feel. Psychotherapists may be able to help you learn how to manage stress and cope with SAD in a healthy way – many times without medications.

Alternative Therapies

There are a number of alternative therapies for SAD and depression – especially mild to moderate depression – that can significantly improve symptoms and overall mood. If you're feeling depressed, the following, in addition to light therapy, counseling, and medication, might help you feel better:

- Good nutrition
- Supplements, such as St. John's Wort (not recommended for people on SSRIs and certain other medications)
- Exercise
- Addressing other physical problems, such as thyroid disease, that can lead to symptoms of depression
- Relaxation and/or meditation

Medication

Some people with SAD may benefit from the use of antidepressant or other psychiatric medications, however, most have side effects, so you should talk with your doctor and weigh the benefits and the risks of treating SAD with medication.

Fight the Good Fight

Whether you've got SAD or you're just feeling blue due to holiday stress or feeling like you're cooped up inside for the winter, there are steps you can take to deal with those negative feelings. Work together with your doctor to come up with a plan that is best for you, and take charge of your life by creating habits that may even stave off the worst effects of Seasonal Affective Disorder.

- **Stick to your treatment plan:** Take medications as directed, and attend therapy appointments as scheduled.
- **Let the sunshine in:** Open your blinds, trim tree branches that block sunlight from entering your home, and, if you can, add skylights to let in more light.
- **Get enthusiastic about the great outdoors:** Get outside on sunny days whenever you can.
- **Get your body moving:** Exercise is not only good for your physical health, it's good for your mental health as well. It helps relieve both stress and anxiety, which can increase the symptoms of SAD. Yoga, Pilates and other exercise classes may also help you relax and feel better, which leads to the next tip...
- **Remember to take care of you:** Eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, and take time to really relax. If you need help with general wellness, contact Northwestern Memorial's Center for Integrative Medicine.
- **Learn how to manage your stress:** Though it's easy to let your busy life overtake you, don't let that happen. Learn how to manage your stress, so it doesn't turn to depression, overeating, chemical dependency or other harmful thoughts and behaviors.
- **Take time for your friends:** Having friends is important to a healthy state of mind. Make it a point to stay connected to those people who are important to you—even if you think you just don't have the time. If you need support, consider joining a support group.
- **Get away from it all:** Take a trip. If you can make it happen, get away to sunny, warm location at least once during the winter months.

Take Charge of Your Life

As the sunshine disappears for the winter, don't let your mental or physical health disappear along with it. If you think you suffer from SAD, or you're feeling stressed, blue or depressed for any reason, don't hesitate to contact your doctor. Together, you can fight SAD and work toward making it just another acronym.

We're Here if You Need Help

Though many people suffer from depression, it's not a "normal" condition, and you don't have to live with the symptoms. If you'd like to meet with Dr. Stracks to find out how you might best tackle your feelings of depression, please contact him at the Northwestern Memorial Physician's Group Center for Integrative Medicine and Wellness at Northwestern Memorial. They are located at:

150 E. Huron St, Suite 1100
Chicago, IL 60611
312-926-DOCS (3627)

If you ever feel you are a danger to yourself or others, don't delay – call for help immediately. You may wish to call a depression help line. There are three local numbers for you to call:

National Crisis Hotline: 1-800-784-2433
LifeLine: 1-800-273-8255
Depression Hotline: 630-482-9696

If you or someone you love is in immediate danger, please **call 9-1-1** or go to your nearest emergency department.