WLG 246

West Virginia University
EXTENSION SERVICE

Why Be Sad? How to Beat the Winter Blues

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Educational Objectives

1. Learn what causes seasonal affective disorder and how to recognize the signs.
2. Describe how light therapy, exercise, counseling, and medication can lift mood.
3. Pick one mood-boosting self-care habit to practice weekly.

Note to leaders:

To teach this lesson, you will need drinking straws, pens/pencils, and note paper.

What is Seasonal Affective Disorder?

It's the "winter blues." Appropriately called SAD, Seasonal Affective Disorder is a mood disorder that affects an individual the same time each year. It usually starts when days become shorter in October and ends in April or May when the days become brighter.

Icebreaker: Name this tune! Sing or hum along.

Gray skies are gonna clear up, Put on a happy face;
Brush off the clouds and cheer up, Put on a happy face.

Answer: "Put on a Happy Face"

Breath of Joy:

To practice beforehand, watch this short video:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OZ3v3w1h0g

- Stand, if comfortable.
- As you keep inhaling, quickly lift arms to the front, out to the side, and up.
- Exhale with a "Ha!" sound as you swing your arms down and back, as you bend forward at the waist.
- Repeat 3 times to build energy and lift the mood. Inhale – inhale – inhale – exhale is the count.

Ask participants:

- Do you know someone who feels down, irritable, or drained of energy during the winter months?
- What might be signs of the "winter blues"?

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What is the difference between SAD and depression?

SAD is actually a physiological condition where the brain and body are just not getting enough sunlight! It is common in areas where winter days can be short and gray with about one in three individuals suffering from SAD.

SAD is diagnosed when:

- You feel better when spring arrives (in contrast to regular depression that stays all year.)
- The pattern repeats at least two years in a row.
- There is no obvious cause for the depression, such as being out of work in the winter.

SAD symptoms:

- Can be mild, like feeling "out of sorts" or irritable.
- Can be quite serious, impacting relationships and quality of life.

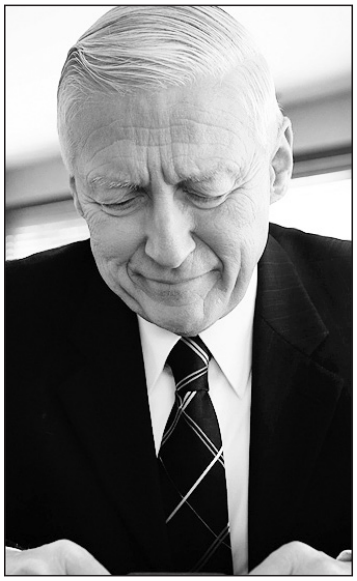
Did you know that between 60 to 90 percent of people with SAD are women?

SAD can be treated. Even if your symptoms are mild, light therapy and exercise can help.

Take the Quiz:
Ask participants to take the short quiz found in their guides.

If they prefer, they can answer the questions thinking about a family member or close friend. Point out the online resources at the end of both guides for information they could print out and share with their doctor.

What causes SAD?



Recent research is showing that most Seasonal Affective Disorder symptoms come from daily body rhythms that are out-of-sync with the sun. Winter's late dawn and early dusk cause changes in the body's internal biological clock, or circadian rhythm, which in turn, affects mood-altering brain chemicals.

- Circadian rhythm, the brain's central clock, is a 24-hour cycle that affects our eating, sleep/wake cycles, and other biological rhythms. In vulnerable people, less daily sunlight can bring on depression and negative thinking.
- Brain chemicals like the feel-good chemical serotonin have a strong impact on mood. During fall and winter, darker days and low light lead to lower levels of serotonin. When you are "a quart low in serotonin," you can feel tired, depressed, and crave carbohydrates. Winter weight gain can be a result of eating more in an attempt to raise your serotonin to feel better. Serotonin levels are highest in August and lowest in February.
- Even though the chill in the air can bring you down, SAD is related to lower daylight rather than temperature.

What lifts SADness?

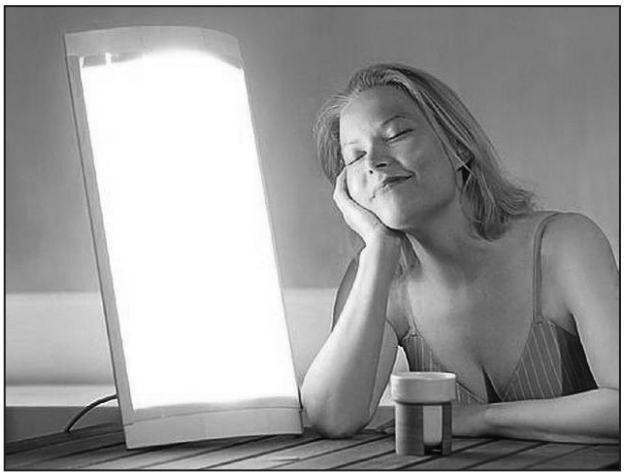
The short answer is finding a way to change your brain chemicals and reset your daily rhythms!

These strategies have been proven helpful in resetting the brain's clock: light therapy, exercise, stress management, counseling, and medication.

Light therapy

Sitting in front of a light box is the most studied treatment, bringing relief to 75 percent of those with SAD. It has repeatedly been found to be as effective as antidepressant medication but works faster and causes fewer side effects.

> ***Tip:*** Remember to raise the shades first thing in the morning to help get mood-lifting light to your brain!



Why it works

Light therapy relieves SAD by increasing the amount of bright light that enters your eyes. Your eyes then send signals to your light-starved brain, which help to reset the brain's central clock.

When and how much light?

- Treatment is started in the fall or early winter, before the symptoms of SAD begin.
- Symptoms of depression improve within three to four weeks if light therapy is going to help.
- Mayo Clinic recommends sitting 12 to 14 inches from a 10,000-lux light box for 30 minutes each day. Adjust the time up or down from the 30-minute dose. Use the light at a different time of day, depending on your response.
- Keep your eyes open facing the light, but don't look straight into the light source.
- The best time for light therapy is in the early morning, to mimic sunrise. Ideally, wake up early and set aside some time to relax and use your light box. The Morningness – Eveningness Questionnaire at *http://www.cet.org/eng/Tools_ENG.html* gives specific guidelines about your optimal times to go to bed, get up, and use a light box.
- Tanning beds are not an alternative to light therapy. The ultraviolet light (UV) released by tanning beds can cause skin and eye damage.
- Don't skimp on money when buying a light box. Get one large enough to be beneficial.
- Talk to your doctor before using light therapy. Start slowly. Track your depression to see what changes.

Are there side effects?

Side effects, such as headache, eyestrain, agitation, or difficulty getting to sleep, usually disappear by decreasing the dosage of light to an optimal level (typically 20 to 30 minutes).

People with bipolar disorder, macular degeneration, or advanced diabetes with eye problems should not use light therapy.

Can exercise and stress management help?

> **Remember:** The less you feel like moving, the more important it is to do so!

Yes, definitely! Here are some tips to boost your mood:

Leader: Discuss the exercise and stress management tips found in the participant guide.

Straw breathing exercise

Instructions: Place a straw in your mouth. Inhale through your nose and exhale slowly through the straw. Gently allow your

breath to become a bit longer. Relax, let it be easy. Continue for 2 to 3 minutes. Getting the breath rate down to six breaths per minute significantly reduces stress levels.

Should I talk to a counselor?

There is no substitute for knowing yourself to help feel better and overcome challenges life has dealt you. Talking with a mental health professional can help you focus on changing thoughts and behaviors that contribute to SAD.

Don't hesitate to seek help from a professional if:

- You have been depressed for a long while.
- You checked several symptoms on the short quiz.
- You feel isolated and misunderstood.

Find a licensed mental health professional through your insurance company, the Yellow Pages, online, or your doctor. Most insurance plans cover this service.

What about medication?

Many SAD sufferers are helped by taking antidepressants from autumn through the end of March to increase the serotonin levels in the brain. It can take several weeks to notice the full benefit.

- Follow your doctor's instructions in taking your medicine.
- Do not stop your medication suddenly; taper off working with your doctor.
- Medicine is more effective when combined with counseling or light therapy.

If you or someone you know is suffering from SAD please seek help. No one should suffer with untreated depression when options are available.

Tips for helping others:

- Try to spend more time with the person, even though they may not seem to want any company.
- Help them make a plan for treatment and stick with it.
- Remind them that summer is only a season away. Tell them their feelings are temporary, and they will feel better.
- Go outside and do something together. Take a walk as you get them to spend some time in the natural sunlight.

The power of intention

What will you do for your mental health this week? Ask participants to write out one or two mood-boosting ideas that they will do this week.

Where to learn more

(Also see more resources in the participant guide.)

Watch this short video: "Seasonal Affective Disorder: How to Cope with the Winter Blues" *www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/28/seasonal-affective-disorder_n_2535666.html*

Download a Depression and SAD questionnaire from WVU Extension Families and Health: *fh.ext.wvu.edu/emotional-wellness/sad/sad-tests*

If you prefer an instantly scored (anonymous) quiz: *www.cet.org/eng/Tools_ENG.html*
The Morningness – Eveningness Questionnaire will give you specific guidelines about the best times for you to go to bed, get up, and use a light box.

Rapking, J. and Quick, S. (1995). "Out of the Blue: Understanding and Responding to Depression." University of Kentucky Extension. *www2.ca.uky.edu/hes/fcs/FACTSHTS/FAM-SAM.112.PDF*

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