



Why Do I Feel So S.A.D.?

It starts to hit as soon as daylight savings leaves in November – the looming idea of shorter and darker days. We live for December 21, when the days gradually begin to get longer. Still, it is dark by 5pm, causing us to hibernate, curl up with a good book or Netflix, put off any form of exercise until spring, and find comfort in the most creamy and starchy foods we can find.

Sound familiar?

If it does, you may be experiencing a form of Seasonal Affective Disorder, also known as SAD, or the winter blues. Seasonal Affective Disorder is a specific type of depression that begins in fall or early winter, continues through the winter, and is triggered by seasonal changes, cooler weather, and the dreaded time change.

What's the science behind this, you might ask? Basically, the farther north of the equator you live, the more you will be affected by the lack of sunlight during the winter months. Our bodies have a natural circadian rhythm, which helps regulate the body's internal clock – this is what tells you when to sleep and when to wake up. However, sunlight does play a role in keeping your circadian rhythm regulated. Therefore, less sunlight can throw off the body's natural rhythms.

When our circadian rhythm off, it can affect two hormones in our brains – melatonin and serotonin. Melatonin is a sleep-related hormone, and serotonin is a natural brain chemical that affects our mood and our general sense of well-being. A drop in either of these chemicals can cause depression.

Symptoms can begin mild and get worse as the season progresses. SAD affects 10 percent of the U.S. population, but just like clinical depression, more woman experience SAD than men – about 75 percent of reported cases are women. As we age, the numbers even out and men and women are affected equally by SAD later in life. SAD can also affect children. There is a genetic component to SAD, so if a family member has experienced seasonal or clinical depression, the chances are stronger than you will too.

Symptoms of SAD can include: feeling sad, grumpy, moody, or anxious; losing interest in your usual activities; eating more and craving [carbohydrates](#), such as bread and pasta; gaining [weight](#); sleeping more but still feel tired; and having trouble concentrating.

Treatment Options

There are many different ways of treating SAD, some of which include:

- **Take a Melatonin supplement.** As mentioned previously, Melatonin is a sleep-related hormone that helps to regulate our sleep cycle. Supplements are available over-the-counter, but as with any medication, check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking it to make sure that it won't interact with other medications you may be taking, or any other aspect of your lifestyle.
- **Counseling.** The benefits of counseling are far-reaching. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a great form of treatment for SAD and/or depression, and the negative self-talk that often accompanies both. But counseling is also a great resource for processing information for decision-making, receiving encouragement, and just being heard. Catholic Charities' counseling program employs ten professionally trained and licensed counselors in six offices throughout the Archdiocese who can also bring a spiritual component to helping you with your problem.
- **Light therapy.** Light therapy mimics outdoor light and causes a biochemical change in your brain that lifts your mood, relieving symptoms of seasonal affective disorder. In light therapy, you sit a few feet from a specialized light therapy box so that you're exposed to very bright light. Light therapy is generally easy to use and has relatively few side effects, one of which could be eyestrain. However, it is important to research this thoroughly and talk to a doctor before buying a light box
- **Let there be light.** Even without taking the step to buy a light box, you can make your home sunnier and brighter. Open blinds, turn on lights, trim tree branches that block sunlight. Many people take Vitamin D in supplement form, but it's the vitamin that we naturally get from sunlight. Most Americans are Vitamin D deficient. Between living in northern climates where there is less sunshine for one-third (or more) of the year, to the newest advances in sunblock and skin cancer prevention, Americans are not getting all of the Vitamin D they need. Severe Vitamin D deficiency has been linked to weak or brittle bones.
- **Get out.** Get outdoors on sunny days, even during winter. Take a long walk, eat lunch at a nearby park, or simply sit peacefully on a bench and soak up the sun.
- **Exercise regularly.** Physical exercise helps relieve stress and anxiety, both of which can increase SAD symptoms. Being fitter and stronger can make you feel better about yourself, too, which can lift your mood.
- **Take care of yourself.** Get enough rest, eat a balanced diet and take time to relax. Don't turn to alcohol or drugs of any kind for relief.
- **Practice stress management.** Learn how to manage stress more effectively. Unmanaged stress can lead to depression, overeating, or other unhealthy thoughts and behaviors.
- **Socialize.** Stay connected with people you enjoy being around. They can offer support, a shoulder to cry on or a joke to give you a little boost.
- **Take a trip.** If possible, take winter vacations in sunny, warm locations if you have SAD. If the budget or your work schedule does not allow for a vacation, get

- out of the house and take a one-day road trip. A change of scenery always does a body good.
- **Anti-depressants.** If a change in your regular routine to include most of the resources listed above has not improved your mood, and/or if your sadness persists throughout most of the year and is not just seasonal, please consult with a doctor and your therapist to see if an anti-depressants might help you through this time.
 - **Faith.** As Christians, we have another resource at our disposal – our faith in Jesus Christ. Through meditation on scripture and through prayer, we can find peace and the strength to get us through the down times. “Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance.” (Psalm 42:5)

Resources for Seasonal Affective Disorder

Light Therapy

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/in-depth/seasonal-affective-disorder-treatment/art-20048298?pg=1>

<http://www.sadlamps.org/choosing-a-sad-light/>

<http://psycheducation.org/treatment/bipolar-disorder-light-and-darkness/light-therapies-for-depression/>

Stress Management

Square breathing – inhale to the count of four or five through your nose, exhale to the count of four or five through your mouth. Repeat 10 times.

Butterfly hugs – cross your arms so that your right hand is resting on your left upper arm, and vice versa. Slowly tap each arm, alternately, while breathing slowly.

Other ideas:

- Squeeze a stress ball
- Smell a candle or lotion that is your favorite scent
- Look at a picture of nature or a loved one that makes you feel good

Books

60 Ways to Make Stress Work For You by Andrew E. Slaby

Relax and Make Your Stress Work for You: The 7 Step Plan by Sarah Sutton

