

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

A Toolkit for education and coping

Created by Elle Vinagre



Table of Contents

1. Resources and Hotlines
2. What is SAD?
2. Signs and Symptoms
3. Statistics
4. Preventative Measures
5. Coping Strategies
6. How/when to get help
7. Author's Note



But first...Hotlines!



24/7 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline
Call 988 or text HELP to 741741

Available in English or Spanish



24/7 Crisis Counselors
Text “NAMI” to 741741

Connect to a crisis counselor in minutes!



NAMI Mercer (New Jersey)
HelpLine

Call 1-609-799-8994 extn. 17

What is Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)?

SAD is when an individual goes through an aggressive change in mood starting in the late fall or early winter and typically goes away when the spring and summer approaches.

If you have ever heard someone mention the “winter blues” or “seasonal depression” they are likely referencing Seasonal Affective Disorder!



What is Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)?

There is also spring and summer SAD, sometimes referred to as summer depression as well! This may sometimes include trouble sleeping, weight loss, increased irritability, and/or agitation or anxiety

QUICK FACT:

Individuals with Bipolar disorder are at increased risk for developing SAD. For some individuals with bipolar, manic episodes may present with a specific season/time of year. This can also amplify depressive symptoms like irritability and anxiety during the winter months (Mayo Clinic, 2021)



Signs and Symptoms

Symptoms of SAD tend to begin slowly in late autumn, and are comparable to general depression symptoms



Symptoms may include but are not limited to:

- Loss of interest in work or other activities
- Mood changes
- Slow, sluggish, lethargic movement
- Social withdrawal
- Unhappiness and irritability
- Change in appetite
- Less energy and ability to concentrate in the afternoon
 - all symptoms must occur for most of the day, every day for at least 2 consecutive weeks
 - These symptoms should persist in the winter for 2 years or more

(NJ Dept of Health, 2018)

Statistics

Two in Five Americans Say Their Mood Worsens in Winter; 29% Say “Falling Back” Hurts Their Mental Health (American Psychiatric Association, 2024)

More women (45%) than men (37%) said their mood declined in winter and the time change had a greater impact on women—33% of women said it was bad for their mental health versus 26% of men (American Psychiatric Association, 2024).

Seasonal affective disorder occurs four times more often in women than in men and the age of onset is estimated to be between 18 and 30 years (Melrose, 2015).

Those living farthest from the equator in northern latitudes are most susceptible (Melrose, 2015).

Preventative Measures

Some suggestions if you or someone you know may be struggling with SAD are:

Spend time with your loved one even though the person may be withdrawn or quiet



Take a walk outside each day and keep your house well lit

Practice relaxation techniques such as yoga and/or meditation

Mindfulness is always important regardless of what you're going through. It's always better to get ahead of your mental health!



Sit closer to bright windows both at home and in the office

If a loved one really seems unwell you can try to gently refer them to a therapist, psychiatrist or physician for treatment

How/When Should I Get Help?

To be diagnosed with SAD, an individual must

Have the symptoms of depression or the more specific symptoms of winter or summer pattern SAD

Depressive symptoms occur during specific seasons (winter or summer), for at least 2 consecutive years

Depressive episodes are more intense and frequent during this season compared to depressive symptoms throughout the year

Have the symptoms of depression or the more specific symptoms of winter or summer pattern SAD

How Can I Get Help?

There are many ways to get help with SAD. A few things that can help are:

Light therapy:

Light boxes can be purchased to reflect light similar to sunlight. Symptoms may decrease if the individual sits in front of the light box first thing in the morning.

Vitamin D

Low levels of vitamin D can be associated with depression and SAD. Taking Vitamin D before winter darkness sets in may help prevent symptoms of depression.

Counselling

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has been studied to help those with SAD. CBT is used to break down problems that seem overwhelming and negative patterns by changing the way people think about them, which can be helpful in lifestyle changes to improve quality of life for those with SAD.

Author's note

Hi there! My name is Elle Vinagre, and I am a current senior studying psychology with a public health minor at The College of New Jersey. My career goal is to become a social worker, in an attempt to be a person who helps individuals feel heard while also advocating for mental health.

The inspiration for this toolkit is the lack of understanding of SAD, and invalidation towards those who struggle with it. I feel as though this topic gets undermined when in reality it can be detrimental to someone's quality of life and mental wellbeing. I also want those with SAD to feel seen and have a few strategies for making those difficult days a little easier.

I have loved my time at NAMI Mercer and I am super grateful for the opportunity to be an intern here. It is extremely fulfilling to be surrounded by such kind individuals who share my passion for mental health advocacy!

References

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/seasonal-affective-disorder>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20364651>

<https://www.psychiatry.org/news-room/news-releases/apa-poll-mood-changes-in-winter>

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1155/2015/17856>