

Coping with Seasonal Depression

Objective

To identify if you suffer from seasonal affective disorder (SAD) and find ways to cope.

What to Know

If you experience the blues when the days get shorter and the temperatures drop, you might have seasonal affective disorder (SAD)—a form of depression triggered by daylight and weather changes. It typically begins and ends at about the same time each year, where symptoms start in the fall, continue into the winter months, and go away during the spring or summer. Experts estimate that 4-6% of Americans suffer from SAD, and as many as 20% experience the “winter blues.” These are the common symptoms of SAD:

- sad or down most of the day, every day, in a seasonal pattern
- low energy or fatigue
- sluggishness
- difficulty concentrating
- loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy
- appetite changes
- weight gain
- hopelessness, worthlessness, or guilt
- sleep problems
- thoughts of death or suicide

Note: If you are thinking of harming yourself, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. It is available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress.

It is important to get treatment and find effective ways to cope with SAD because all forms of depression limit your ability to live your life to the fullest, enjoy time with loved ones, and function well at work or school. To cope with SAD, here are a few suggestions.

- 1. Prepare for shorter days.** Set yourself up for the winter season by starting in the fall—regularly schedule mood-boosting activities, initiate contact with friends, find a new hobby, join a club, or engage in community service. Take part in these activities before the winter blues set.
- 2. Try a light box.** Light therapy—exposure to artificial light to keep your circadian rhythm on track—is considered a first-line treatment for SAD. Light therapy or phototherapy boxes provide light that mimics sunshine. The light is much brighter than that of regular light bulbs and has different wavelengths. Sit in front of the light box for 20 to 30 minutes each day upon waking.
- 3. Use a dawn simulator.** This device is an alarm clock that produces light that gradually increases in intensity, just like the sun. The best ones use full-spectrum light, which is closest to natural sunlight.
- 4. Consider medication.** If light therapy does not completely relieve your symptoms, you might

consider taking a prescription antidepressant from autumn until spring.

5. Prioritize social activities. Studies have found a relationship between social isolation and depression. Find creative and enjoyable ways to stay connected with others, like spending time with loved ones at a local park, playing an outdoor sport, or joining a hiking club. If you cannot get out, Face Time or Zoom with friends and extended family members.

6. Use aromatherapy. A recent study found that essential oils can help lessen symptoms of depression by influencing the area of the brain that is responsible for controlling moods and the internal clock. Using essential oils might be a simple and safe way to improve mental well-being, especially when paired with other soothing activities like taking a bath.

7. Get into a routine. Perhaps you have trouble falling asleep and waking in the morning. Maintaining a regular sleep schedule and having good bedtime habits can improve your sleep. Avoid the use of electronic devices at least two hours before bedtime.

8. Prioritize physical activity. Regular exercise can help reduce the symptoms of SAD and offset weight gain. Outdoor exercise is most beneficial, but if it is too cold or icy, use a treadmill, stationary bike, or elliptical machine next to a window.

9. Get as much sun exposure as possible. Get outside as much as you can during the day to take advantage of what sunlight there is. Bundle up and take a walk around noon when the sun is brightest. When indoors keep your blinds open to let in as much natural light as possible.

10. Take a break. If you can, take a vacation to a warmer climate to escape the cold. Even a short break from your daily routine in a sunny place can be helpful. If travel is not an option, plan a “staycation”—take time off work and find ways to have fun within your own home and community.

11. Avoid alcohol. If you feel down, you might be more likely to drink alcohol, but drinking contributes to depression.

12. Write in a journal. Consistently using a journal can positively affect your mood because it helps you prioritize your problems and identify triggers. Write about your thoughts, feelings, and concerns each night to reflect on all that happened in the last 24 hours.

What to Do

First, answer the following questions.

What are some of the symptoms you experience during the fall and winter months?

Have you experienced these symptoms in previous years, at the same time of year? Explain.

What else can you do to cope with SAD?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
