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FOCUS ON HEALTH

Is It More Than “Winter Blues?”

By Ann Cross, RN, MS, MBA

We’ve all heard it or perhaps said it ourselves, “This weather is so depressing.” Is it just those winter days that are long on darkness and short on sunlight inviting us to stay indoors with cold temperatures? Or is it something more? While many of us enjoy winter for the winter sports or the chance to curl up with a book by a warm fire, some people suffer from very real symptoms of depression during winter months that are significant enough to severely impair typical daily activities.

Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, is a mood disorder characterized by depression that is seasonal in its occurrence and may be related to the seasonal change of light and the advent of winter. According to Mental Health America, half a million people are affected by SAD every winter. Particularly susceptible are people living where winter days are very short and the nights are long. Seventy five percent of people with SAD are women; the illness typically begins in a person’s twenties although onset has been reported in persons as old as fifty five years old.

People with SAD experience a depressed mood as the seasons change, characterized by sadness, hopelessness, and despair. They tend to be anxious, irritable, and have difficulty concentrating. Oversleeping with daytime

fatigue and difficulty staying awake are common. Feelings of fatigue can lead to inability to engage in normal activities and loss of interest in what is usually pleasurable activity as well as social withdrawal. SAD sufferers crave sweet or starchy foods resulting in weight gain.

The specific causes of SAD are unknown. Most likely, SAD is related to our bodies’ internal clock, the circadian rhythm. It may be that seasonal variations in light disrupt the regulation of the circadian rhythm that keeps us on a sleep-wake schedule. Disruption to the body’s “knowing” when to wake or sleep may lead to depression.

Other researchers relate SAD to the production of melatonin, a sleep-related hormone. Production of melatonin increases in the dark. The theory is that as daylight is in short supply, increased production of melatonin leads to a depressed mood.

Yet another theory involves the neurotransmitter, serotonin. Serotonin production is stimulated by sunlight. A reduction in light results in less serotonin production, a reduction of which contributes to depression.

Regardless of the theory, the key to SAD is most likely the body’s response to a decrease

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or lack of sunlight. The good news is that there is treatment, and doctors most frequently recommend light therapy as treatment. Light therapy is usually prescribed as a daily “dose” of light; sitting in front of a light box daily through the fall and winter months when the SAD sufferer is typically depressed. Exposure to the bright light emitted from the light box, which mimics natural outdoor light, is thought to alter the circadian rhythms and suppress the body's natural release of melatonin. Light therapy is usually discontinued in the springtime when enough outside sunlight is available.

Additional treatments that may help are antidepressants and cognitive behavior therapy. Learning about SAD and how to manage symptoms can be especially helpful.

So what if you think you have SAD? If your symptoms are severe, consult a mental health professional and comply with the treatment plan that is developed. Remember the importance of light. Open curtains and blinds. Let light into your home. Go outdoors when the sun is shining, even in winter. A brisk walk on a sunny winter day will not only get you the light that you need, but the exercise will help to relieve stress. Feeling better physically can help to lift your mood. Practice good health habits; a balanced diet, exercise, getting enough rest and relaxation. Practice stress management techniques. Reach out to friends and family that you enjoy being around. And if you can....try a change of scenery to a warmer and sunnier climate for a vacation or a more permanent solution.

Resources:

National Alliance on Mental Illness <http://www.nami.org>

Mental Health America <http://www.nmha.org>

American Academy of Family Physicians <http://familydoctor.org>

Mayo Clinic.com <http://www.mayoclinic.com>

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