

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) Brighten Up the “Blue Season”, (September - March)

According to the American Psychiatric Association (2008), symptoms of depression that come during the colder months, generally, September through May, can be associated with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). Research suggests that SAD may affect 11 million people in the United States each year.

There are several theories as to the cause of SAD; ambient light, changes in body temperature, reduction in social contact and/or outdoor activities, and changes in sleep patterns. However, researchers have found one of the most significant contributing factors of SAD is a change in hormone production, specifically, melatonin.

Current Health 2, a Weekly Reader Publication reports that, “studies have shown that in the dark, the brain increases its production of melatonin, a hormone related to sleep.” With a significant decrease in daylight hours between the months of September and March, it is no wonder that symptoms of SAD including but no limited to increased sleeping, difficulty staying awake, fatigue, overeating and weight gain, lack of interest, and feelings of sadness seem to be more prevalent in winter months.

Treating SAD:

The most effective treatments for SAD have been identified as cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), talk therapy, and light therapy. Karen Liberman, Executive Director of the Mood Disorder Association of Ontario, stated in *Globe and Mail (Toronto, Canada)* 2010, reported that light therapy has been shown to be the most effective treatment when treating extreme manifestations of SAD. She further states that studies suggest that 30 minutes a day of light therapy from a light box with a lux (light intensity) of 10,000 or 45 to 60 minutes of daily exposure to a lux of 5,000 can improve the mood of individuals diagnosed with SAD by 60 to 70 percent.

However, regardless of the degree to which symptoms of SAD affect you (mild, moderate, or severe), increased daylight and signs of growth/nature blooming can serve to brighten both your mood and environment. Try a few of these recommendations through the winter months.

- Go to bed earlier and wake up earlier to maximize your time awake during daylight hours (and decrease the number of hours you are awake in the dark).
- Place a reading chair near a window and sit there as often as possible.
- Plant winter bulbs in pots, or ornamental grass (found at pet stores) to watch daily growth
- Keep cut flowers in visible areas within your home
- Maintain an exercise routine to increase serotonin and endorphins (natural mood stabilizing hormones).
- Do “opposite emotions” such as play upbeat music, watch a comedy, or dance.
- Connect with a therapist in your area to discuss cognitive behavior therapy or talk therapy as a support during the winter months.

References:

Globe & Mail (Toronto, Canada), How to beat blue Monday, January 18, 2010.

<http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides/disease/seasonal-affective-disorder/overview.html>

<http://sadtherapylamps.com/checkout/onepage/success>