

Experiencing SAD: Seasonal Affective Disorder

As we progress into the fall months October, November, December, the days are shortening, we become more lethargic, pack away the BBQ and pull out the Crockpot. We may note a shift in our spirits, and attribute it to the passing of summer vacation. Weather has often affected people's moods... "sunlight breaking through the clouds can lift our spirits, while a dull rainy day can make us feel a little gloomy." For most people these mood shifts do not interfere with our daily functioning, however some people are vulnerable to a type of depression which follows a seasonal pattern. The shortened days can incite a type of clinical depression which can last until spring. This condition is called "Seasonal Affective Disorder" or "SAD".

A mild form of SAD is often referred to as the "winter blues", which cause discomfort, but is not incapacitating. What causes SAD? Research is ongoing; however, it is thought to be related to the seasonal variations in light "A" "biological internal clock" in the brain which regulates our circadian (daily) rhythms. Other research shows the neurotransmitters (chemical messengers) in the brain that help regulate sleep, mood and appetite may be disturbed in SAD.

Symptoms of SAD. SAD can be difficult to diagnose since many symptoms are similar to other types of depression or bipolar, or even thyroid problems. Generally symptoms that recur for at least two consecutive winters without any other explanation for the changes in mood or behaviour, indicate the presence of SAD. Symptoms include:

- Change in appetite (craving sweet or starchy foods)
- Weight gain
- Decreased energy
- Fatigue
- Tendency to oversleep
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability
- Avoidance of social situations
- Feelings of anxiety & despair

Who is at Risk? Research in Ontario suggests 2-3% of the general population may have SAD, and another 15% have the less severe experience described as "winter blues".

Treatment. Increasing your exposure to light, monitoring your diet, sleep patterns, and exercise are important first steps. For those who are severely affected, devising a treatment plan with a health care professional consisting of light therapy, supplementation of the hormone melatonin, medication and cognitive behavioural therapy may also be needed.

So when feeling blue, don't pull that comforter higher over your head and lounge in bed, open the drapes, turn up the lights, move your chair closer to the window when reading your paper, get out for a walk to grab some of the sunshine and fresh air. If you are feeling you may be one of the 15% with the winter blues, or find your mood to be severe, seek a medical consult.... there are effective solutions to improving one's quality of life.