

Seasonal Affective Disorder

“And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided that light from the darkness. And God called the light Day...”

Genesis 1:3

Do you feel down or sad every winter? Well, you may be suffering from a condition known as seasonal affective disorder, or SAD. This is depression that is caused by light deprivation, occurs only during months with limited hours of daylight, and subsides in the spring and summer months. It might be a mild condition which causes “winter blues”, or a more serious illness which requires medical treatment. There are various theories regarding the cause of this seasonal depression. Just as the change in seasons affects animal behavior (hibernating and reproductive cycles), they may cause a shift in our biological clocks. The cause of this disorder is not fully understood. One theory implicates Melatonin, which is a hormone normally produced by humans that may cause symptoms of depression. This hormone is produced in larger quantities in the dark, so with winter having longer periods of darkness each day, there would be more melatonin produced than in sunnier months. The fact that people are more isolated in the cold winter months may also contribute to the “hibernation-like” cycle. Common symptoms of this cyclic depression include excessive sleeping, overeating, a craving for carbohydrates, fatigue, weight gain, and most importantly, a full recovery from depression in the spring and summer months. Although this condition can affect anyone, the most vulnerable population seems to be young women. For those people whose lives are significantly disrupted by symptoms, treatment is a must. There are things that can be done to improve the spirits and wellbeing of a SAD sufferer. Some studies show that light therapy has helped up to 85% of those who have been diagnosed with this condition.

Light therapy involves being exposed to a light that is at least ten times the intensity of regular household lighting for around an hour each day. Average lighting in a home or office is about 350 lux, but to treat SAD 2500 lux is the minimum intensity required. To give some perspective, a bright summer day can be 100,000 lux! The user simply needs to sit within two feet of a special light, and can carry on normal activities such as reading or eating. It is recommended that this be done in the morning, as exposure later in the day may interfere with falling asleep at night. The key is for the light to enter through a person’s eye. An improvement in mood will generally be apparent after three or four days of light therapy. Whether this stimulates the production of chemicals that have an antidepressant effect or reduces the amount of Melatonin produced is not clear. Light therapy must be continued on a daily basis for it to be effective. Before purchasing one of these special lights, try one that offers your money back if you are not satisfied, or possibly rent a light. Sometimes, antidepressants and psychotherapy are also recommended. Light therapy is widely in use, especially in the North where days are both short and cold. So if you think you may have a seasonal mood disorder, investigate it with your physician and get some help. There is no longer any reason to suffer.

Be someone’s sunshine today! For more information, check out: www.mayoclinic.com or www.familydoctor.org

God's Blessings, Nurse Karen