

# North Shore Center, LLC

## February 2020 Newsletter

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### Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

It's not hard to imagine the "drag-your-feet" feeling you get when you wake up on a cold, foggy winter morning. Your energy may come from your cup of coffee as you sit in class or work through what feels like an endless day. When the sun is not there to wake us up, most of us want five more minutes to press snooze. However, there are times when a wish for more rest can spiral into

constant feelings of low energy or interest for daily activities and, sometimes, even feelings of sadness or depression. The shift from one season to the next can send people of all different ages into a period of sadness, and this emotional funk may not always be cured by a sunny day.

### What is it?

*Psychology Today* defines Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) as a Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), with recurrent episodes of depression, and these episodes occurring during the same season every year. Both MDD and SAD episodes are characterized by distinct depressive symptoms. Some include:

- Feeling hopeless and/or sad
- Changes in weight, specifically gaining weight
- Feeling tired or lacking in energy
- A lack of interest in social situations and daily activities
- Thoughts of suicide

However, MDD symptoms aren't required to occur at any time or season in the year and may continue across all seasons. Therefore, Seasonal Affective Disorder differs from Major Depressive Disorder because SAD depressive episodes must be linked to a specific change in the seasons. Often Seasonal Affective Disorder is called the "winter blues," because people affected usually experience depressive symptoms in late fall or

early winter, and their symptoms tend to drop off in the spring (*Psychology Today*). However, Seasonal Affective Disorder does not just occur in the winter. Some people may have their depression linked to the spring and summer seasons. Seasonal Affective Disorder symptoms in these months include:

- Changes in appetite and weight loss
- Loss of sleep or insomnia
- Feelings of anxiety or agitation

## Why does it happen?

Research indicates SAD may possibly be related to the changes in the amount of daylight one gets each day. While the exact cause remains unknown, we do know that as the winter days grow shorter and dark quicker, the body produces more melatonin, a hormone regulating the sleep-wake cycle, therefore making one feel more tired and sluggish. Serotonin, another chemical linked to pathways in the brain regulating our moods, also may be implicated. When serotonin dips low, it can lead to feelings of depression and possible weight gain (*WebMD*).

## Who's at the greatest risk?

Seasonal Affective Disorder is said to affect nearly ten million Americans. It is most common in women, nearly four times more common in women than men (*American Family Physician*). Additionally, one can be at a higher risk of experiencing Seasonal Affective Disorder if one has a family history of depressive disorders, lives far from the equator, or is younger in age (*National Institute of Mental Health*). The most common time to receive a diagnosis is in one's early 20s, but older children and teens have also been known to have this condition (*American Academy of Pediatrics*). The chances of receiving the diagnosis decreases with age.

## What can we do about it?

The *National Institute of Mental Health* lists four possible treatments:

- Medications
- Light Therapy
- Psychotherapy
- Vitamin D

Medications such as Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) or antidepressant drugs may be used to treat one's seasonal depressive episodes. Also, Light Therapy can be used to treat seasonal depression. Created in the 1980s, this treatment exposes one to artificial bright lights that mimic natural sunlight. A form of psychotherapy called Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is commonly used to treat Major Depression and has been adapted for treating Seasonal Affective Disorder. CBT works by identifying

one's negative thoughts and replacing them with positive thoughts. Finally, Vitamin D may be used to treat seasonal depressive episodes since people diagnosed with Seasonal Affective Disorder are often found to have low levels of Vitamin D in their blood. This supplement compensates for poor diets and a lack of exposure to the sun (*National Institute of Mental Health*).

In summary, Seasonal Affective Disorder is a type of depression that can affect people during the change of the seasons. The best way to minimize or manage is to make sure one gets daylight at least once a day, uses light therapy, eats a well-balanced diet, takes Vitamin D supplements, and stays involved with his or her social circle. If you persistently notice yourself feeling depressed, sluggish, and irritable at the same time every year, and the aforementioned approaches don't help, then one should consult with his or her MD or their Mental Health professional.

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