



## Winter SADness

By Tasha Walsh, LCSW

On top of the effect of monthly hormonal changes, many women also have to deal with a seasonal impact on their mood.

Seasonal Affective Disorder, conveniently referred to as SAD, is a type of depression first defined in the mid 1980s. While it's fairly common to experience bouts of "winter blues" or "February doldrums", people who suffer from SAD experience days on end where they feel depressed, have trouble getting motivated to do anything, sleep a lot, and in extreme cases, can feel like they're 'going crazy' and even become suicidal.

Norman Rosenthal, MD was one of the researchers at the National Institute of Mental Health credited with first identifying SAD in the mid 1980's. Scientists have not yet determined the exact causes of SAD, yet research indicates that it is related to how people's body rhythms and brain chemicals respond to the changes in the amount of daylight. It's estimated that SAD impacts about 10 million adults in the US and, as is true of general depression, it seems to affect twice as many women as men.

Approximately  
6.6 Million  
women in the  
U.S. suffer from  
SAD

Anti-depressants are sometimes prescribed to help severe cases of SAD, but there are a variety of non-pharmaceutical interventions also available. Many people may be familiar with the idea of "Light Therapy", or exposing oneself to bright lights for a period of time during the day. There are many resources for Full Spectrum lights, which mimics the variety of light waves given off by the sun. Other light therapy approaches focus more on the intensity and amount of exposure and involve sitting under a special lamp which gives off much more light than an indoor light bulb. Dawn simulation, which involves having a lower intensity light come on gradually in the hours before you wake up, is also proving to be effective.

Nutritional interventions are being tried as well. While there is not scientific evidence to back up the effectiveness of vitamin supplements, Vitamin D deficiency is getting a lot of media attention, and there is some thought that Vitamin D supplements can help the body combat the impact of Seasonal Affective Disorder.

Exercise has also been shown to be helpful in combating depression. Joining the gym during the winter and actually using your membership is good for you

physically and emotionally. James Blumenthal, a researcher at Duke University, found that taking a brisk 30 minute walk 3 times a week is just as effective as anti-depressant in treating depression and is more effective over the long term. In a study he led, 92% of the people randomly assigned to an exercise group felt better nearly a year later, compared to only 62% of the people taking anti-depressant. During the winter, taking a brisk walk outside gives you the benefit of the exercise plus an extra dose of daylight.

Positive Psychology research also provides some approaches that can be helpful with SAD. Positive Psychology is the study of what makes people happy. So rather than just looking at reducing symptoms of depression, we're starting to learn specific ways to increase symptoms of happiness.

For the past several years, I've taught a Personal Positive Psychology Workshop which the participants have nicknamed "Happy Class". In the class we learn about how our brains work and what behaviors, communication styles and thought patterns are connected to increased happiness. We also do a lot of exercises that stem from the positive psychology research. One participant told me that this was the first winter in her adult life that she didn't get depressed.

A simple yet effective activity is what Martin Seligman, author of the book Authentic Happiness, calls the Blessings Exercise. At the end of each day, write down three good things that you noticed. They can be large or small things; things that happened to you or things that you did or observed. The act of taking note of good things elevates your mood in the short term and also reinforces neural pathways in your brain. In effect, you are training your brain that noticing good things makes you feel happier.

The phrase "random acts of kindness" has been around for quite some time, and now research is showing that this approach is very effective in elevating the mood of not just the person receiving the act of kindness, but also the person being kind. Sonja Lyubomirsky, at Riverside University, found that people who intentionally committed five acts of kindness in one day were four times happier than those who did five kind things over the course of a week, and six times happier than those who did nothing special. In our Happy Class, I ask the participants to pick one day a week to be their Random Kindness day.

With Seasonal Affective Disorder, the symptoms of depression will fade as the days get longer. But during the long nights of winter, sufferers of SAD can find some relief by exercising, getting extra exposure to light and engaging in some simple exercises focused on increasing happiness.

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