

COPING WITH THE SEASONAL BLUES

Fall is here, and because we live in New England, it is time for Patriots football, fresh apples and crisp air. Most people are energized and ecstatic about this time of year, but for others the change in seasons brings an entirely different feeling. Something begins to happen in mid-August. As the sun moves lower in the sky, positive attitudes seem to lower along with it. While most people are embracing the brisk weather, some are freezing. Some people wake up in the morning feeling anxious and tense. Others get a sense that there is something wrong when there isn't.

If the changing seasons are taking a toll on your mental state, it may be a sign that you are afflicted with Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD.

What causes SAD?

Experts aren't sure what causes SAD. But they think it may be caused by a lack of sunlight. Lack of light may:

- Upset your "biological clock," which controls your sleep-wake pattern and other circadian rhythms
- Cause problems with serotonin, a brain chemical that affects your mood

What are the symptoms? If you have SAD, you may:

- Feel sad, grumpy, moody, or anxious
- Have low energy
- Be irritable
- Have appetite changes, especially a craving for foods high in carbohydrates
- Gain weight
- Lose interest in your usual activities
- Eat more and crave carbohydrates, such as bread and pasta
- Sleep more but still feel tired
- Have trouble concentrating

Anyone can get SAD, but it's more common in:

- Women
- People who live far from the equator, where winter daylight hours are very short
- People between the ages of 15 and 55 (the risk of getting SAD for the first time goes down as you age)
- People who have a close relative with SAD

It's normal to have some days when you feel down. But if you feel down for days at a time and you can't get motivated to do activities you normally enjoy, see your doctor. This is especially important if your sleep patterns and appetite have changed, you feel hopeless, think about suicide, or turn to alcohol for comfort or relaxation. Treatment for SAD may include light therapy (phototherapy), psychotherapy and medications.

If this is your reality, don't brush off that yearly feeling as simply a case of the winter blues or a seasonal funk that you have to tough out on your own. Take steps to keep your mood and motivation steady throughout the year. Whether you are affected by anxiety, depression or SAD, you can move more gracefully through it and embrace life more fully.

