



Seasonal Affective Disorder

A Light Changing Experience

by GAIL CARROLL

*Bows and flows of angel hair
And ice-cream castles in the air
And feather canyons everywhere
I've looked at clouds that way.*

*But now they only block the sun
They rain and snow on everyone
So many things I would have done
But clouds got in my way...*

(Excerpt from *Both Sides Now* by Joni Mitchell)



Beautiful long sunny days into the evening become distant memories as the daylight and the weather changes in late fall through the winter months. We see darker, shorter days and more clouds, and for a number of us “clouds” do get in the way as the song goes. The changing light, weather and temperatures can get in the way of our energy levels, sleep and concentration and have a significant impact on our bodies, minds and spirits. We crave sunshine and the good feelings the sun brings our way.

“As October began, I could hardly drag myself out of bed each morning. My body felt so heavy and tired. Normally I am a morning person, but I have noticed in the past few years that I am really struggling with my energy when the fall season arrives and I struggle just to get through the days, but it seems to resolve itself as the spring approaches and the days become longer again. I questioned if I had some type of depressive disorder, but, the funny thing was that I could think of no reason why I would be depressed.” (Individual experiencing SAD)

What this person is referring to is Seasonal Affective Disorder, commonly known as SAD. SAD is a seasonal depressive disorder that is more prevalent in Canadian and northern climates where we are most affected by the lack of sun when our daylight hours are shorter with the changing of the seasonal light.

Seasonal Affective Disorder is commonly referred to as the “Winter Blues”. Do you ever think about any of the following questions?

1. Do you dread the long winter nights?

2. Do you crave carbohydrates in the winter and gain “winter weight”?
3. Do you like to hibernate in the winter?
4. Do you feel exhausted, anxious and/or depressed?
5. Do you crave sunlight?

If you answered YES to any of these questions, please keep reading to learn more.

One in six people or 6% of the general population on average is diagnosed with and/or experiences SAD. Another 20% of the population experience less debilitating symptoms and can be classified generally as “The Winter Blues”.

The symptoms of SAD generally begin to make an appearance between September and November each year and symptoms usually begin to relieve between late March and early May as spring approaches. Seasonal Affective Disorder was first professionally described by Dr. Norman E. Rosenthal and his associates at the National Institute of Mental Health.

Symptoms of SAD can range from mild to severe and can interfere with an individual's ability to function in their daily lives relative to the severity of their symptoms.

SAD symptoms involve changes in:

- **Energy:** feeling more tired than usual but may not understand why.
- **Mood:** feeling sad, irritable, hopeless, higher sensitivity, bouts of crying and lowered self-esteem for a period of at least two weeks in duration.
- **Cognitive Function:** difficulties with memory and concentration. Brain feels sluggish. You are just not as motivated as usual.
- **Anxiety:** feel less able to deal with stress.
- **Immune System:** lowered immune function making you more susceptible to colds and other viruses.
- **Sleep:** sleeping more and/or having the desire to sleep more. Feeling sleepy during the day. Disrupted sleep and /or insomnia.
- **Eating:** a desire to eat foods higher in carbohydrates and calories (comfort foods) resulting in winter weight gain.
- **Socialization:** hibernating and isolating yourself.

The usual age of onset of SAD is 18-50 years of age. After age 50 the symptoms of SAD and risk of SAD significantly declines; however, research has not yet been able to show the reason(s) for this.

Why does SAD happen? What causes it?

It is believed that there are two hormones the body produces that are affected by light and our bodies' natural circadian rhythms. It isn't fully understood how and why SAD happens; however, current theories showcase the role that sunlight plays in producing the two key hormones that regulate your bodies' sleep-wake cycles, energy and mood. These two hormones are:

1. **Melatonin** which our bodies manufacture to regulate our sleep-wake cycle. When it is dark (days are shorter) our body makes more melatonin which can make us feel sleepy and lethargic.
2. **Serotonin** which is also made by our bodies and is related to our mood. Exercise and sunshine can increase our serotonin levels. Increasing or higher levels of serotonin help us fight depression.

What can you do to combat SAD?

- *Recognize the signs and symptoms* and talk to your doctor about your symptoms.
- *Be aware of the light in your life.* Try to increase the amount of time you spend outdoors. Try to take a walk over your lunch break or after work. Increased exposure to sunlight/daylight for even 20-30 minutes a day can be helpful. You can also explore different forms of light therapy. Two favorites in light therapy are the Philips goLite Blu Energy Light which is available locally at Costco and the Philips Wake-up light which simulates the sunrise and sunset and is also available locally at Costco. To explore either of these options take a look at www.philips.ca and look at the information and demo on their website through health and beauty products. Ensure that you spend as much time as possible in well-lit spaces throughout the fall and winter months, i.e., keep blinds and curtains opened, arrange furniture so that you are getting the maximum exposure to the light and trim tree branches that may block the light from your home.
- *Pay attention to your diet.* Try to eat good carbs, i.e., rice, pasta and whole grain breads as opposed to eating junk food. Ensure you are getting lots of vitamins, especially magnesium and potassium along with your ABCD vitamins. Eat a good mixture of fruits and vegetables along with nuts and whole grains.

- *Vitamins:* A good multi-vitamin is helpful and a minimum of 1,000 IU of Vitamin D is more helpful. Vitamin D can be purchased in tablets, melting mint strips and liquid drops. Vitamin D is known as the sunshine vitamin and according to the Ministry of Health in British Columbia, many Canadians are Vitamin D deprived because our climates are so different than those of the southern USA. Some interesting and helpful reading on Vitamin D is "The Vitamin D Cure" by James E. Dowd, M.D.
- *Work with it!* Recognize how the changes of seasons affect you and if they do, be sure to seek professional advice from your doctor, Employee Assistance Program and/or local mental health resources, i.e., Canadian Mental Health Association. When individuals work with their symptoms and seek professional consultation when needed, the symptoms of SAD can be managed whether through artificial light, natural light, exercise, diet, vitamins, anti-depressant medication, talk therapy or a combination of the above.
- *See a counsellor:* Talk therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy can be helpful. Remember to contact your Employee Assistance Program.
- *Others:* Practice stress management. Take good care of yourself. Get out and socialize. Take a trip to a warm, sunny place.

Whatever you choose to do this fall and winter season, remember to take good care of you!

Remember to take care of your body; it's the only place you have to live! ~ John Rohn

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Gail Carroll is a Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for Teachers. For confidential assistance contact Gail Carroll (ext. 242) or Judy Beranger (ext. 265).

References

www.sad.org.uk
cmha.ca/understanding-mental-illness/mood-disorders/seasonal-affective-disorder
www.mayoclinic.com (articles referencing seasonal affective disorder)
www.heretohelp.bc.ca/factsheet/seasonal-affective-disorder

Resources

- For stress management: www.iorest.us (for yoga and mindfulness meditation)
- For light therapy: www.philips.ca
- Vitamin D: *The Vitamin D Cure* by James E. Dowd, M.D.
- *Winter Blues: Revised Edition: Everything You Need to Know to Beat Seasonal Affective Disorder* by Norman E. Rosenthal, M.D.