

## do your feelings change with the seasons?

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**T**his time of year, it's not uncommon to hear people complaining about one of the dreaded annual markers of the transition from fall into winter: waking up in the dark and going home in the dark. The shortened daylight hours leave many of us with little time to get out and enjoy the small amount of sun that we seem to get on the East Coast after work or other daily activities are over. Some people may also find that they have less energy, are feeling more irritable or anxious, and are beginning to crave sweet or starchy foods. While these may be unwelcome but manageable downsides of the approaching winter for most, for others the changing seasons can have effects that indicate a serious mental health issue known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

SAD, a subtype of depression, affects approximately two to three per cent of Canadians, and women are more like to suffer from it than men. Classic SAD is typically marked by symptoms that appear in fall and winter, but they can also appear in other seasons. Symptoms of SAD commonly include:

- Changes in appetite, with increased cravings for sweet or starchy foods
- Weight gain
- Decreased energy
- Fatigue
- Oversleeping
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability
- Avoidance of social situations
- Feelings of anxiety and despair

About 15 per cent of people experience these symptoms during this time of year, but to a milder degree in that their daily personal or work lives are not significantly impaired and their symptoms do not constitute a diagnosis of SAD. While SAD can be difficult to recognize and diagnose because its symptoms are common to other mental and physical health issues, generally symptoms must have recurred for two consecutive winters without another explanation for

changes in mood and behaviour, and must have abated by the following spring or summer.

So far, researchers have not confirmed one single cause of SAD. The predominant theory is that less sun exposure in the winter results in higher than usual production of the hormone melatonin, which can affect the internal daily biological clock (circadian rhythm) and cause sleepiness and lack of energy. Imbalance of the neurotransmitter serotonin has also been linked to SAD, as it is thought to play a role in depression and anxiety in general. In the Atlantic provinces, snow and poor weather can last in some areas until May or later, and these wintry conditions can compound the effects of the shorter days by limiting the amount of time spent outdoors being active or involved in social activities. The many unrealistic social expectations and financial stresses of the holiday season may also worsen symptoms for some.

SAD symptoms can improve with treatment and self-care, and individuals generally recover from their symptoms once spring and summer arrive. Without appropriate treatment, however, the symptoms of SAD can become severe, even leading to thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

There are several treatments available for SAD, including light therapy, which involves prescribed periods of exposure to a special lamp or light box that emits a bright, artificial light; certain antidepressant medications; and cognitive behavioural therapy. However, any potential treatment should always be discussed first with your doctor or other health care provider. Some individuals experiencing symptoms of SAD may even find relief in

travelling south for the winter, but there are many forms of self-care you can use at home to help prevent or manage symptoms, including – but not limited to – the following:

- Rise earlier in the day to maximize the amount of time spent awake during daylight hours
- Use artificial light to brighten your home and work spaces
- Spend more time outside engaged in enjoyable winter activities
- Maintain healthy eating habits
- Continue or start an exercise regime
- Reach out to your friends, family and other social supports
- Take time for yourself during the busy holiday season

If you are a friend, partner, family member or coworker of a person who has SAD, ask them how you can help create a supportive environment for their recovery, perhaps by offering to listen to their concerns or help with some of their responsibilities.

Making sure to put your mental health first during the fall and winter months to offset the symptoms of SAD can be challenging, but you don't have to suffer in silence or alone. Speak to your family doctor or other health care provider if you feel you may be experiencing symptoms of SAD or any other mental health issue. If you are having suicidal thoughts or are experiencing a mental health crisis, in Newfoundland and Labrador, call the Mental Health Crisis Line at 709-737-4668 in the St. John's area, or toll free 1-888-737-4668. For more information on Seasonal Affective Disorder and CMHA-NL's "Spotlight on SAD," check out the "November Hot Links" found on [DownhomeLife.com](http://DownhomeLife.com). ☐

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