

'Winter Blues' May Signal Seasonally Based Depression

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The months of November and December, while typically characterized by crisp, cool weather; the novelty of occasional snow; and of course, the holiday season, are just as well known for the progressive decrease in daylight hours which continues until the Winter Solstice (December 21 or 22) commonly known as the 'shortest' day of the year. For many people, however, the traditional tidings of joy are tempered, if not altogether supplanted, by an onset of symptoms such as anxiety, decreased energy, excessive sleep, feelings of hopelessness and/or anxiety, significant appetite changes and outright depression which are seemingly correlated to the reduced sunlight of fall and winter.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (euphemistically and somewhat aptly referred to as SAD), is this form depression believed to result, at least in part, from the impact an extended period of diminished sunlight has on the human body. While there is no universal agreement as to a specific cause of SAD, among the most commonly held views are that because of less sun exposure, a person experiences a disruption to the body's 'internal clock,' or circadian rhythm, which dictates a person's sleep patterns. There is also much evidence to suggest that the change in seasons can disrupt the body's production of hormones such as melatonin, and neuro-chemicals like serotonin, both of which significantly influence mood.

Fortunately, there are many treatment approaches for SAD, some of which involve replenishment of melatonin or serotonin; others which are more therapeutically based, including "light therapy." In which the effects (and benefits) of sunlight are mimicked through the use of a light therapy device. Before beginning any course of treatment approach, it is recommended that anyone believing they may have SAD speak with a trusted physician so that other, possibly serious conditions or contributing factors can be ruled out.

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