

When sadness is more than the winter blues

SAD



As the days grow shorter

and cooler, people often look forward to watching the leaves change, slipping into their favorite sweaters, and cozying up to a fire. However, if you dread the approaching season, you aren't alone. Up to 20% of the population experiences "the winter blues," and as many as 10 million Americans suffer from seasonal affective disorder (SAD).

While everyone occasionally feels a little down, SAD is a recurrent major depression experienced during the same season each year. "The winter blues can be described as a seasonal 'funk' where you may be disappointed that it's cold outside, there isn't as much daylight, or your activities have been limited," explains Julie Manuel, MSEd, clinical program manager of Kettering Behavioral Medicine Center. "Seasonal affective disorder is a type of depression caused by a biochemical imbalance in your brain, and it impacts your mood to the point where you experience a shift in how you think, feel, and handle

daily activities for four to five months of the year."

There are two main types of SAD:

- Winter-pattern SAD, when you experience a recurrent major depression during the fall and winter months and return to a better mood and outlook in the spring and summer
- Summer-pattern SAD, when you experience a recurrent major depression during the spring and summer months

Most people with seasonal affective disorder have winter-pattern SAD. Symptoms generally start to appear between ages 18–30. Both men and women can experience SAD, but women are four times more likely to have seasonal affective disorder than men.

Symptoms of SAD may include

- Feeling hopeless and depressed most of the day and nearly every day
- Feeling tired, sluggish, or irritated
- Losing interest in activities you previously enjoyed
- Changes in appetite or weight
- Difficulty concentrating

- Frequent thoughts of death or suicide
- Interrupted sleep patterns or difficulty sleeping

Don't delay seeking help

"A lot of times we see people who have struggled with seasonal affective disorder for several years and only at that point do they reach out for help," says Julie. "They hesitate to seek help because they think their symptoms are limited or will improve once the seasons change. But there is no need to suffer for months at a time, year after year. Help is available, and you deserve to feel at your best, in every season."

WE'RE HERE FOR YOU

If you think you might be struggling with SAD or other mental health concerns, call **1-855-472-0134** to schedule an appointment at Kettering Behavioral Medicine Center.

Coping with shifts in season and mood

There are strategies you can implement to stave off the winter blues and help keep symptoms of SAD at bay.

- ✓ **Take a brisk walk.** "If you start to notice a shift in your mood, ask yourself when the last time was you were outside," says Julie. "Bundle up and go for a quick walk, notice the sunshine and breathe in the fresh air. Making time to go outside, participating in regular exercise, and eating healthy foods are all conservative measures you can take to improve both your mood and overall health."
- ✓ **Switch up your seating.** "Rearrange your furniture to face windows and open up your blinds to let the sun shine in," Julie advises. "Exposure to light and warmth from the sun can help improve symptoms of SAD."

✓ **Try light therapy.** A light therapy box emits a bright light that you sit in front of or under for a specified amount of time each day. "A lot of people see improvements in symptoms and mood after just one or two weeks of using light therapy," says Julie.

✓ **Talk it out.** Cognitive behavioral therapy, also known as talk therapy, with a licensed provider can improve symptoms of SAD and major depression.

✓ **Ask your doctor about medication.** Some people require prescription medication to manage their SAD symptoms. Your doctor will assess if you could benefit from prescription medication and recommend the best drug.