

Seasonal affective disorder: It's more than winter blues

By Julia Haskins

Winter can be a difficult season to get through. The days are shorter and colder, and you're more likely to spend more time indoors. You may not take part in the same activities you would when it's warm and sunny outside. While plenty of people get down during the darker months, some people go through a more serious form of the winter blues called seasonal affective disorder.

Seasonal affective disorder is a type of depression that comes around the same time each year, usually beginning in autumn and ending in spring. Winter is usually the toughest season for people to get through.

It's not so much the cold weather as the lack of light that makes the disorder so hard to deal with, says Jill RachBeisel, MD, vice chair of clinical affairs in the Department of Psychiatry



at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. The amount of light we get can affect our waking and sleeping cycles and our mood.

"Seasonal affective disorder is not something to just brush off and tough out," she says.

The disorder mostly affects women and young adults and people who live in high latitudes, meaning that they live far from the equator where there is less sunlight.

People who have family members with depression or a history of depression themselves are also more likely to have it. But the disorder can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender, location or genes. That's why when winter rolls around, it's important to recognize signs and symptoms and get help if you need it. People with seasonal affective disorder may feel tired, sad or irritable. They may lose interest in their favorite activities and withdraw from friends and family. Hunger, weight gain and difficulty sleeping are also typical.

Some people also go through the disorder during the summer, although it's much less common then. People with summertime seasonal affective disorder may feel restless or angry and can also have weight loss, less appetite and problems sleeping.

There are three main types of treatment for seasonal affective disorder, RachBeisel says: light therapy, psychotherapy and medication. A mental health professional might recommend one of these treatments or a combination.

Light therapy involves a box that gives off a bright light that you sit in front of for about 15 to 30 minutes every day. If you use light therapy early in the fall, you may be able to reduce symptoms of seasonal affective disorder or prevent it altogether, RachBeisel says.

Antidepressants and psychotherapy have also shown to be effective treatments for the disorder. A therapist can help you talk through feelings of sadness or hopelessness and can help you find solutions to stay active and



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connected to the people around you when you're depressed, RachBeisel says.

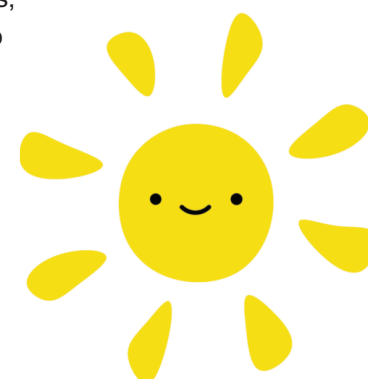
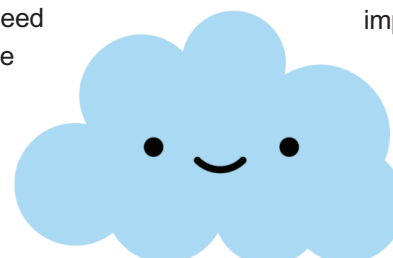
Even though scientists don't know exactly what causes seasonal affective disorder, light plays a big role in treatment.

"Getting as much exposure as you can during your daily activities is really important," RachBeisel says.

She encourages people with the disorder to go outside as much as possible to take in natural light. Even if it's cold, a short walk outside during your lunch break can help you feel better. At home, arrange your furniture or position yourself so that you can take in light from the window, she suggests. And for some people, getting natural light is helpful enough that light therapy may not be necessary.

Some signs and symptoms of seasonal affective disorder may just feel like normal parts of going through a rough patch during the winter. But if you're concerned that you have more than just a case of the winter blues, speak to a mental health professional about what you're feeling. Some mental health problems can even get worse with seasonal affective disorder, RachBeisel says.

Symptoms of the disorder do generally lift when spring comes, but it's important to take care of yourself in the meantime. Remember that it's temporary and there are brighter days ahead.



Enjoy winter a little more

Even with seasonal affective disorder, you can find ways to get through the more difficult months and have fun doing it. Though you may have to adapt some activities for winter weather, you can still enjoy them. To make the season a little more bearable, try these ideas to keep you active, healthy and happy:

- ◆ Lace up your skates and practice your moves at an ice-skating rink.
- ◆ Invite some friends over for a potluck with healthy comfort foods.
- ◆ Bundle up and take a brisk walk around your neighborhood with a friend.
- ◆ Roll out your yoga mat for some stretching.
- ◆ Surround yourself with nice things at home, like bright flowers or cozy blankets.



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