



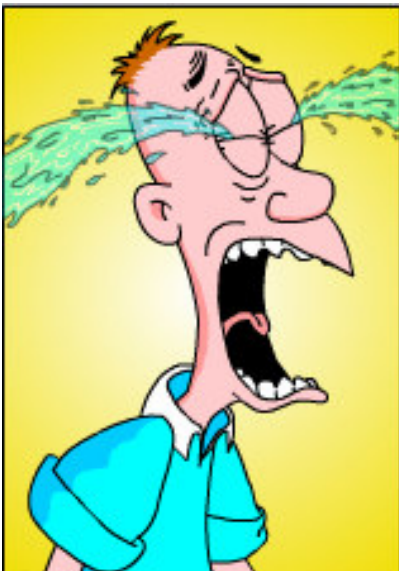
January Blues?

SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) is a form of depression that is caused by a lack of exposure to light during the winter. It is caused by a biochemical imbalance in the hypothalamus (the part of the brain involved in controlling the release of hormones) due to the shortening of daylight hours and the lack of sunlight during the winter months.

Sufferers of SAD find that their emotional state is quite normal during the summer months, but as the days grow shorter, colder and greyer during the autumn and winter, their moods seem to match the seasons. The seriousness of SAD can range from mild depression or the "Winter blues", to a serious attack of clinical depression. For many people SAD is a seriously disabling illness, preventing them from functioning normally without continuous medical treatment.

Symptoms

The Symptoms of SAD include sleep problems, lethargy, overeating, depression, irritability and desire to avoid social contact, anxiety, loss of libido and mood swings. Most sufferers show signs of a weakened immune system during the winter, and are more vulnerable to infections and other illnesses. Studies have shown that it affects women more than men, and although it can begin at any age it occurs most often between the ages of 20yrs – 40yrs.



What is the difference between SAD and other types of depression?

The main difference between SAD and other types of depression is that SAD occurs only during the winter months. In many types of depression, people generally eat and sleep less and lose weight. However people with SAD usually eat and sleep more and gain weight when it is cold and dark outside.

SAD, like other types of clinical depression, is not caused by psychological or social factors, although such stresses can aggravate it. Normal sadness does not generally include these physical symptoms and is situational.

"Winter Blues or Christmas Blues" can be distinguished from SAD because they are generally not accompanied by physical symptoms. Instead they are caused by the typical stresses of the December holiday season and occur only around that time.

Treatment

If you think you may be suffering from SAD you should seek medical advice. The following are common methods used to alleviate the symptoms of SAD.

Light therapy has been shown to be very effective in up to 85% of diagnosed cases. That is, exposure, for up to four hours per day (average 1-2 hours) to very bright light, at least ten times the intensity of ordinary domestic lighting. Ordinary light bulbs and fittings are not strong enough. Average domestic or office lighting emits an intensity of 200-500 lux but the minimum dose necessary to treat SAD is 2500 lux. The intensity of a bright summer day can be as high as 100,000 lux! Light treatment consists of sitting two to three feet away from a specially designed light box, usually on a table, allowing the light to shine directly through the eyes.



Traditional antidepressant drugs such as tricyclics are not usually helpful for SAD as they exacerbate the sleepiness and lethargy that are symptoms of the illness. Daily exposure to as much natural daylight as possible, especially at midday, should help. Psychotherapy, counselling or any complementary therapy which helps the sufferer to relax, accept their illness and cope with its limitations are extremely useful.

