



Don't be Sad!

Overcoming SAD and the Holiday Blues

The last few months of the year can be a particularly challenging time psychologically. Summer is over, and suddenly you are feeling more tired, more depressed. The often intense feelings about the holidays to come are already beginning and other stressors associated with the holidays may also have started. Your carbohydrate and sugar cravings seem to be increasing, and you are gaining weight. What's going on?

Beginning in October or November, when daylight hours begin to get shorter, SAD, or seasonal affective disorder, begins to appear. SAD affects approximately six percent of Americans (four times as many women). Many sufferers do not even realize what is happening.

What causes seasonal affective disorder? Experts believe that SAD has to do with the brain's response to decreased daylight, affecting changes in melatonin and serotonin in the brain. Higher melatonin levels may create increased lethargy and fatigue. Decreased levels of serotonin, due to lessened sunlight, may increase depression.

The bad news is that all of the depressive symptoms of SAD can range from mild to extremely severe. You may want to socialize less, even though holiday times can be a difficult "food time" when you most need support. SAD may negatively affect concentration, motivation and energy, making compliance to your food and exercise plans harder and completion of everyday tasks more difficult. SAD brings with it changes in eating—in particular, cravings for comfort foods and the tendency to overeat. In just a few months, long periods

Signs of SAD

- Fatigue
- Depression
- Sharp increase in carbohydrate and sugar cravings

And sometimes:

- Difficulty getting out of bed
- Decreased sexual interest
- Lethargy
- Hopelessness
- Lack of interest in normal activities
- Suicidal thoughts (in severe cases)

of hard work and weight loss can be undone. SAD may also make you more sensitive to criticism, harder on yourself and more inclined to feel worthless. These feelings may lead you to discount the important progress you have made this year, and that would be a huge mistake!

Overcoming SAD

The good news is that SAD is easily treated. Mild SAD responds well to increased light. Morning light seems to help most. Take advantage of the limited sunlight by spending time outdoors. Full spectrum (daylight) light bulbs can be placed in household lamps and in regular lamps at the office. More severe symptoms can be treated easily and inexpensively with light therapy, or phototherapy. Phototherapy consists of a special light box, which you sit in front of for a specified period of time each day, a simple and often relaxing procedure. Your primary care physician or mental health professional should be able to diagnose and supervise treatment.

Don't forget the basics! Try food charting. Call a friend. Go to a support group. Go online for extra support, encouragement and understanding. In some cases, antidepressant medication to regulate the balance of serotonin and other neurotransmitters in the brain may be prescribed. When spring returns, most people with SAD find relief from their symptoms, with an increase in energy and a lifting of their depression.

The Impact of Holidays

For many, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa can be a lonely time, and loneliness can be an instant trigger for binge eating. Try not to fill the loneliness with food. Although it may seem like everyone else is having fun, that's probably not true. Some of the people that you know are also lonely at this time. Reach out to others. Invite someone to visit you. Volunteer at a shelter, nursing home or soup kitchen. Help is always needed, and you will be doing a real and appreciated service to others. You do not need to be alone.

Holidays can be stressful—too busy, too rushed, and too expensive. So many of us feel the need to plan the perfect holiday for those we love: the perfect meal, decorations and gifts. All of this is stressful and exhausting. It is essential that you take some time out to relax and recharge. We are taught from childhood that this is a season to be happy. Unfortunately, it's not all that simple. Holidays can be joyful, filled with wonderful

events and memories. But holidays can also include memories of loss, pain, controversy and sadness. As much as we may try to make things perfect, the truth is that family relationships and close friendships can be complex. At holiday time, existing relationships and feelings may be intensified by old, unresolved feelings and patterns reemerging. These intense feelings may be powerful food triggers.

Planning for Success

Create a plan before the holidays come so that you know your options and can care for yourself in ways that won't sabotage your progress. Instead of focusing on food, remember the true meanings of the holidays and all the reasons you have to be grateful. Here are some practical things you can do that will help you face the holiday challenges.

- Write a gratitude list. Include all of the things you have to be grateful for.
- Write a list of reasons you are proud of yourself for this past year. Ask a friend for help, if you wish. They will know lots of things you can be proud of.
- Before the holidays arrive, make a list of things you can and will do to relax. Plan them into your schedule with no erasures.
- Bring a support person with you to family events.
- Notify a friend in advance that they may receive a phone call. Call them if you need to.
- When feelings become too intense, take a walk around the block and temporarily remove yourself from the situation.
- If you have Internet access, go online to find support.
- Spend more time outdoors exercising or walking during the daylight hours

Take care of yourself first, and have a good holiday season! ❖

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