

Community Institute for Psychotherapy

1330 Lincoln Ave #201, San Rafael, CA 94901-2141

Phone (415) 459-5999 Fax (415) 459-5602 www.cipmarin.org

2024-2025 News & Notes



2025 November News and Notes Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

About Seasonal Affective Disorder

First identified in the early 1980s by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)¹, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a type of major depressive disorder. As its name implies, it is associated with certain seasons, most commonly fall and winter months, but, for some, spring and summer.

While we might shrug it off as “winter blues,” SAD is now recognized as a significant mental health disorder, with symptoms lasting about 4 to 5 months per year. It can result in complications affecting daily function, mood, and emotional stability. Many more women than men develop SAD, and individuals with major depression, bi-polar disorder, and other mental health conditions, including anxiety disorder, and a family history, are most vulnerable.

As outlined by NIMH, a diagnosis of SAD not only includes symptoms of major depressive disorder, but is also based on the additional following criteria:

For winter-pattern SAD, specific symptoms may include:

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Oversleeping (hypersomnia)

Overeating, particularly with a craving for carbohydrates

Weight gain

Social withdrawal (feeling like “hibernating”)

For summer-pattern SAD, specific symptoms may include:

Trouble sleeping (insomnia)

Poor appetite, leading to weight loss

Restlessness and agitation

Anxiety

Episodes of violent behavior

Significant complications identified by the Mayo Clinic website² that can result from untreated SAD include social withdrawal; school or work problems; substance abuse; exacerbation of mental health disorders such as anxiety or eating disorders; and suicidal thoughts or behavior.

Treatments

As with any physical or mental health condition, consultation with your physician is imperative. Any decision on treatment should be made in accordance with professional advice.

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Light Boxes (Phototherapy)

Readily available, light boxes are used to provide 30 to 45 minutes of bright light to replace the lost time of natural sunshine. Although certain precautions apply, this has been a mainstay of therapy since the identification of SAD. However, not all products are equally effective.

Psychotherapy has also proven useful, especially CBT-SAD. Therapy can help sufferers by encouraging strategies to counter the disorder, including:

- Learning healthy ways to cope with SAD, especially with reducing avoidance behavior and scheduling meaningful activities
- Identifying and changing negative thoughts and behaviors that may be making you feel worse
- Learning how to manage stress
- Building healthy behaviors, such as increasing physical activity and improving your sleep patterns

Medication: Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are a common treatment for depressive disorders and have also proven effective with SAD. Additionally, NIMH states, “The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved another type of antidepressant, bupropion, in an extended-release form, that can prevent recurrence of

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seasonal major depressive episodes when taken daily from the fall until the following early spring.”

Vitamin D: Many individuals experiencing SAD are also found to be low in vitamin D, the “sunshine vitamin,” which is naturally produced in our bodies when exposed to sunlight. The vitamin’s effectiveness in relieving symptoms has had mixed results. Some have found it helpful; others have not.

More Suggestions: In addition to treatment guidelines, the Mayo Clinic website further advises the following to those experiencing the effects of SAD. In fact, these suggestions make good sense for all of us in these months of shorter days and longer nights!

- Make environments sunnier and brighter. Open blinds, trim tree branches that block sunlight; add skylights.
- Get outside. Take a long walk, eat lunch at a nearby park, or simply sit on a bench and soak up the sun.
- Exercise regularly. Exercise and other types of physical activity help relieve stress and anxiety, both of which can increase SAD symptoms.
- Normalize sleep patterns. Schedule reliable times to wake up and go to bed each day.

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- Especially for fall-winter-onset SAD, reduce or eliminate napping and oversleeping.

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/seasonal-affective-disorder>
2 <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20364651>



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