

Seasonal Challenges: What is Seasonal Affective Disorder?

With the clocks going back recently, it seems like the ideal time for me to write about how the changes in seasons can affect our mental health and well-being.

Some people experience 'the winter blues' when they feel a bit down during the cold, dark months of winter. For others, the feelings they experience are a lot more serious than this and have a profound, negative impact on their mental health. This is known as *Seasonal Affective Disorder*(SAD). Getting through the Winter can pose a significant challenge and the advent of Spring (and the clocks going forward) is eagerly anticipated.

It would be understandable if you found it difficult to accept that Seasonal Affective Disorder is a real condition. Surely the changes in seasons can't affect our mental health that much?! The following extract, taken from a Psychology textbook, may help convince you;

'Some people become depressed during the winter season, when days are short and nights are long. The symptoms of this form of depression, called seasonal affective disorder, are slightly different from those of major depression...Both forms include lowered mood, lethargy and sleep disturbances, but seasonal depression includes a craving for carbohydrates and an accompanying weight gain...'^[1]

We learn from the above that Seasonal Affective Disorder is a 'form of depression' and the symptoms are only 'slightly different from those of major depression'. In other words, it deserves to be taken seriously.

Why does this condition typically affect people in the colder, darker months? We don't know for sure but I find the following explanation convincing;

'Although various mechanisms have been advanced, the most interesting has been the proposal that the light-sensitive hormone melatonin is dysfunctional in individuals with SAD.'^[2]

With the clocks going back, we are exposed to less sunlight and this can trick our bodies into thinking it's night-time, making us feel like we want to hibernate! Can you relate to this?

This may seem like a lot of information to take in! However, I believe it is important to know what we are up against before we attempt to engage in battle with it.

In the next post, we will explore what can be done to guard against Seasonal Affective Disorder and embrace the colder, darker months with renewed enthusiasm.

^[1] N. Carlson, G. Martin and W. Buskist, *Psychology* (London, 2004), p. 792

^[2] Ibid.

Seasonal Challenges: Practical Techniques to Combat Seasonal Affective Disorder

In the previous post, we explored what *Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)* is and how it can have a significant, negative impact on our mental health and well-being.

In this post, we will consider the positive, practical steps we can take if we are struggling during the cold, dark Winter months.

The best explanation we have regarding what causes SAD is the reduced amount of light we are exposed to. We wake up in the morning and it is pitch black; perhaps we spend most of the day indoors and, when we are ready to go home, we drive home in the dark. Often, during the Winter, the only thing telling our bodies that it is daytime is the artificial light we are exposed to in our houses or places of work! What can we do about this challenging situation?

Let's start at the beginning of the day. I don't know about you but I hate waking up in the morning when it is pitch black! Surely, it's the middle of the night – it can't possibly be time to get up yet?! What can help us is the use of a sunrise alarm clock/wake-up light. The light starts coming on about half an hour before we want to wake up. The light gets stronger and stronger, gradually waking the body up. This means we get some light exposure as soon as we are awake – it is more natural (and kinder!) to wake up in the morning this way.

Using a sunrise alarm clock results in us waking up with light; this tells our bodies that it is daytime and time for action! What else can we do?

If you spend a lot of time indoors during the Winter, you might want to invest in a SAD lamp. This is a powerful light that can help keep you awake by inhibiting the production of melatonin (a hormone released by our brains when it is dark). Using a SAD lamp for a few hours a day, particularly in the morning, can help combat the symptoms of SAD.

On the subject of light, it's worth assessing how good the lighting is in your home. My worst experiences of SAD were all when I was living in a poorly-lit flat. Since moving house and installing bright lights in our living room and kitchen, my symptoms have alleviated.

Getting outside as much as possible is very important if we suffer from SAD. Even in the Winter, the light we are exposed to when we are outside is far more powerful than any of the artificial lights mentioned above.

There are other steps we can take to help combat *Seasonal Affective Disorder*, such as getting adequate exercise and practising meditation. Finally, a lack of sunlight exposure can cause Vitamin D deficiency^[1] so foods rich in this vitamin and/or Vitamin D supplements may also be worth investigating.

I hope this information empowers you to enjoy the Winter months much more than you have done previously or at least helps keep the symptoms of SAD at bay.

If you want to know more about SAD, I heartily recommend a book written by Norman Rosenthal called *Winter Blues: Everything You Need to Know to Beat Seasonal Affective Disorder*.

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[1] <https://www.webmd.com/diet/guide/vitamin-d-deficiency> (Accessed 16/02/22).
