

Seasonal Affective Disorder and Addiction Examined

By Jim Rachels

Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD, is a form of depression and is something that millions of people experience throughout the changing of the seasons each year. It is said that 5% of adults experience SAD, some estimates also say up to 10% of the population has experienced this. I think this is something that has not been researched enough. It is just something that doesn't come up when people are speaking about the different types of depression. The times of year that are most prevalent with this disorder are fall and winter. Although some people experience it during the spring and summer as well but that is not as common as the winter blues.

Something that should be first for us to learn about is what are the symptoms to look out for. Here are some of the symptoms that go along with SAD - feeling hopeless, feeling worthless, can't concentrate, having no energy and having problems with your sleep, this is just to name a few as there are many others. One thing to also recognize is that these are pretty much the same symptoms you will be feeling if you just have depression and not SAD. You need to be on the lookout to see if this is happening at random times of the year or is a more seasonal thing.

Right now there are a few theories out there about what some think causes this. This is from American Addiction Centers:

"The precise cause of seasonal affective disorder is unknown, there are three main factors that seem to be involved, all of which are or may be related to the changing nature of the environment due to seasonal cycles."

- **Lower availability of serotonin:** Serotonin is one of the brain's neurotransmitters, and it is thought to be responsible in part for feelings of wellbeing and happiness. Additionally, an article in *Innovations in Clinical Neuroscience* reports that human skin might have the ability to generate serotonin, which may be stimulated by exposure to sunlight. With shorter days in winter, less exposure to sunlight could mean less serotonin, leading to symptoms of depression. Another study found that people who suffer from SAD have slightly more serotonin transporters in winter months than in the summer, leaving less of the neurotransmitter available at the synapse.

- **Increased levels of melatonin:** *Melatonin is a hormone that helps to regulate sleep and wake cycles. It is produced in higher levels in darkness, so one's level of melatonin will rise during winter months. This can lead to oversleeping or a lack of daytime energy. People with SAD may overproduce this hormone.*
- **The underproduction of Vitamin D:** *Vitamin D may be linked to serotonin activity. With an inadequate amount of the vitamin, depressive symptoms may arise. Vitamin D is produced when sunlight transforms a chemical in a person's skin, so production can decrease in the dark winter months.*

Learning the things that go along with this type of depression is important if we are to come up with a plan to battle this issue. How else are we to address the issue if we don't even know what it is and what causes it? This is something where each and every one of us has a responsibility to learn as much as we can in order to help ourselves.

Another question that should be asked is do we know the exact cause of this? As of now the answer to that question is no we do not know the exact cause of this. We know it has to do with the changing of the seasons. It's also believed that this has to do with the availability of sunlight. With the changing atmosphere, it can actually mess with your circadian rhythm and in essence, is affecting your biological clock. It is also been shown that this also affects your brain's chemical makeup. It can affect the levels of serotonin and melatonin which messes with your brain. Thankfully there is research on this subject but just like many things in life, it could be better.

Let's take a closer look at how the serotonin, melatonin and vitamin D issues really affect us. For serotonin, this is from the Mayo Clinic:

"Serotonin levels. A drop in serotonin, a brain chemical

(neurotransmitter) that affects mood, might play a role in SAD. Reduced sunlight can cause a drop in serotonin which may trigger depression.”

This turns out to be an issue for many people. When their brain chemistry is out of whack and they are trying to self-medicate. It's been found that there is some type of relationship between SAD and addiction. People who are using drugs and alcohol tend to use this to not feel the feelings they are currently going through. In essence, they are self-medicating and just trying to numb themselves from pain and perceived pain mostly caused by emotions. As of now, it has been shown that people with SAD are much more likely to deal with addiction issues.

Another thing they are researching is if one type of person will go through this versus another. It has been found through research that SAD affects women more than men and younger people are also more at risk of experiencing this. It has also been found that you are also more likely to experience this if you already suffer from some type of mental health disorder. It is also believed that genetics play a role in this.

Another question is do people tend to use one substance over another while in a depressed state due to SAD. As of right now, alcohol is the number one substance people use during states of depression which includes SAD. These feelings of sadness, hopelessness and feeling unloved are all things that anyone suffering from this can feel at any given moment and it is these feelings that lead us to relapse and use our substance of choice or act out compulsively. Many of us simply lack the coping skills to deal with this type of stress effectively. Many of us don't realize that we are drinking because we are sad or angry and we are sad and angry because we are drinking, it's a vicious cycle.

So how do we go about getting and using the correct coping skills? One thing I've found through my research is to start readying yourself in the fall for what lies ahead. This can be of immense help. Also consulting with a doctor or mental health professional many taking anti-depressants and

these can work as well. Remember this should be done with the assistance of a doctor.

Also, make sure you stick to your routine with social activities. A lot of us experiencing depression tend to let those things fall to the wayside. Make yourself a schedule and stick to it. Some structure in our day can really go a long way in helping us. Also during the winter months, our exposure to vitamin D goes way down so using a supplement and taking in as much natural sunlight as possible can also really help. This can be done with vitamins or lights that are actually designed for this problem.

Another thing is to reduce your sugar intake. Some people will become addicts to the “sugar high” as it boosts energy and makes you feel good. Then comes the crash. This affects your brain’s chemistry and can make you feel a bit more depressed. Look out for all these things and this will help combat SAD.

Something else that is commonly used in the treatment of SAD is bright light therapy. This is from [Stanfordhealthcare.org](https://stanfordhealthcare.org):

“Bright light therapy is used to gradually shift sleeping patterns to what we consider normal. For treatment, the timing of light exposure is critical. For DSPS, the light must be delivered to the retina as soon after spontaneous awakening as possible to achieve the desired effect. People have also reported success with lights that turn on shortly before awakening, to simulate dawn. Morning use may also be effective for non-24-hour sleep-wake syndrome, while evening use is recommended for advanced sleep phase syndrome. There is less data about the effectiveness of light therapy for advanced sleep phase syndrome than there is for morning light exposure in delayed sleep phase syndrome.” Those who try this typically start to see results in two days to a week.

So in the end, if you seek out help and stick to the treatments and routines listed here you will be able to avoid or lessen the symptoms of SAD.

Another major thing that you should do is contact your doctor or mental health professional. These people can help guide you along and educate you on what things to do and things not to do as you are going through the symptoms of SAD.