Seasonal Affective Disorder

What is it, and how can digital mental health treatments help us to manage its symptoms?

National Wellbeing Hub
For people working in Health and Social Care
Sleepio
daylight

Exploring seasonal affective disorder

We've all heard of the "winter blues." A dreary sort of feeling when summer and autumn are over, and you've got several months of darker, colder days ahead. While some people love the winter months, others aren't big fans. In fact, some people struggle with the winter months so severely that they have what's known as seasonal affective disorder, or SAD. Let's talk a little about how SAD affects people, and what solutions are out there.

What is seasonal affective disorder?

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that affects people during winter months, and subsides during the rest of the year. SAD begins to emerge as the days get shorter and colder, and people get less exposure to sunlight. The symptoms of SAD can range from mild to severe, and include fatigue, low mood, loss of interest and motivation, and trouble sleeping or sleeping too much. Many people who struggle with SAD dread the winter months, as they know it will be a hard time for them and can affect their work and relationships.

While still not fully understood, scientists have found a link between shorter winter days and a biochemical imbalance in the human brain. In some people, the circadian rhythm — the brain's natural process that regulates sleep and wakefulness — may fall out of step with the day-to-day schedule. Other factors that may be at play are levels of serotonin and melatonin, two chemicals in the brain that affect mood and sleep patterns.

How can seasonal affective disorder be managed?

Because exposure to sunlight is a factor, experts recommend that people with SAD experience as much daylight as possible. Whenever the sun is out, it's a good idea to try to sit outside or even by a window for a little while. Taking a walk outside is a great option, because it exposes people to sunlight and provides physical activity. Specialised light boxes are also sometimes used to deliver what's called bright light therapy, which mimics natural outdoor light.

Other ways to prevent and manage SAD include spending time with friends and family, or getting more exposure to one's community. Volunteering, taking that walk with a neighbor, or even exploring a winter sport can be helpful. Creating a routine or schedule around any of these options can help keep symptoms at bay and give people something to look forward to during dreary winter months. Since SAD is a form of depression, many of the things typically recommended for people struggling with depression tend to be helpful for SAD.

Of course, the symptoms of SAD can be severe. Anyone who is experiencing symptoms that make it hard to cope with everyday life should seek the assistance of a mental health professional.

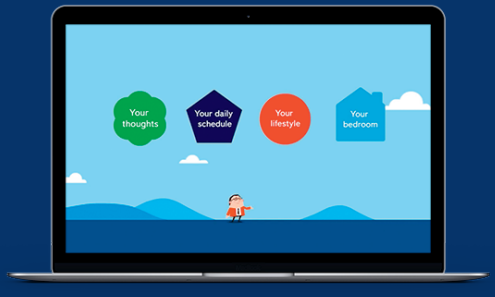
How to address insomnia or anxiety during winter months

If you struggle with poor sleep or anxiety during winter months, Sleepio and Daylight may be able to help. Sleepio is an online sleep improvement programme proven to help people overcome the obstacles that are keeping them from healthy sleep in just six weeks. And Daylight can help you take back control from anxiety. Both Sleepio and Daylight are evidence-based digital programmes that are clinically proven to be both safe and effective: In clinical trials, 76% of participants saw clinically significant improvement in sleep, and 71% of participants recovered from clinical levels of anxiety. Sleepio and Daylight are both available to you free of charge.

Sleepio

For help with poor sleep visit

sleepio.com/nhs



daylight

For help with worry & anxiety visit

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