

UNDERSTANDING SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER (SAD)

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a mood disorder in which those of us who generally have a balanced mood throughout most of the year experience depressive symptoms usually but not exclusively during the winter months. We find ourselves sleeping too much, lacking in energy, overeating and low in mood. SAD is believed to occur due to changes in the body's internal clock, and changes in brain and body's chemicals. It is a common disorder affecting more than 20,000 cases per year in the UK (First Databank and Focus Medica 2020)

The lead up to the clocks going back is particularly challenging for sufferers who typically complain of feeling sluggish, down, out of routine and avoidant due to wet, cold or dark weather conditions. "its like having your own portable black cloud" (mind.org.uk).

I suppose SAD as a diagnosis can be controversial, as lots of us find it hard to motivate ourselves when its cold, dark and damp? However, to experience SAD these feelings are severe and sustained.

SAD is classed as a subset of a depressive disorder by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) as sufferers can experience many of the symptoms of depression including for a smaller percentage. suicidal thoughts. Similar to all mental health problems symptoms vary from person to person with most sufferers 'just' finding life more of a struggle during this time whilst others become more unable to engage in normal day to day functioning.

Sufferers can be greatly helped by supportive family/friends but should also seek medical advice and support as they may benefit from treatments such as anti-depressants and talking therapies. Antidepressants are often prescribed to treat depression and sometimes severe SAD, although the evidence for its effectiveness is limited, with a lack of control trial research data.

Generally Antidepressants are thought most effective if taken at the start of winter before symptoms appear with Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) being the medication of choice. They increase the level of the hormone serotonin in your brain, which can help lift your mood.

Self-care is important and these simple steps may help:

- Keep your house well lit
- Sit close to bright windows at home or work
- Try to exercise even for a short time regularly
- Eat a well-balanced diet
- If you're taking any medications prescribed by your doctor stick to the agreed plan
- Check out mindfulness techniques such as relaxation, imagery, yoga, tai chi and meditation. See what's a good fit for you.
- Cold water swimming a fairly new phenomena for our region is reported as good for our physical and mental health and may be worth looking into at a shoreline near you. (NOWCA – Coldwater Swimming: A Safety Guide)



- Light therapy is also a popular treatment for SAD, many sufferers find the use of a light therapy box daily to be very beneficial; however with limited evidence based research NICE say it's not clear whether its effective,

SAD is real and generally is not pleasant to live with and can at times be seriously disabling. We must also remember that for most sufferers it is possible to tweak things and look forward to wellness improving over time. Understanding why you're feeling the way you do, talking to others so they understand too can be the key to navigating this bend in the road.

Keep talking to yourself compassionately and keep talking to each other.

If you are experiencing feelings of SAD or any other mental health issues contact services admin on 028 9042 7788 and ask for an initial assessment with Psychological services in PRRT.

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www.nhs.uk
www.nice.org.uk
www.mind.org.uk

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