

# life Happens

HEADLINES

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## Changing Seasons, Changing Moods: Understanding Seasonal Affective Disorder

As the sun begins to retreat earlier in the day, the lack of sunlight and colder weather are prime conditions for triggering Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). SAD is a type of depressive disorder that, like its name suggests, occurs seasonally - symptoms typically emerge in the late fall or early winter and subside mid-spring to early summer. The combination of darker days and colder weather can affect our body's production of melatonin, a sleep-related hormone, and serotonin, a neurotransmitter that affects mood. This year we've seen a surge in uncertainty, stress, and isolation, so it's important to be aware that symptoms of SAD may worsen and affect a higher percentage of the population than previous years.

### What Are We Facing This Winter?



While the "winter blues" are a gloomy hallmark of the colder months, this year experts expect many individuals may experience SAD for the first time, or they may experience more severe symptoms. Symptoms of SAD include; lack of energy, mood changes, depression, sleep problems, irritability, and overeating. These symptoms can worsen with increased levels of stress or anxiety, which is becoming commonplace given the current political and economic climate. With the holiday season just around the corner, our celebrations may look different due to social distancing guidelines, which can contribute to feelings of loneliness.

## Ways to Manage SAD

**Soak up the sun.** Many of us wake in darkness and commute home in darkness, but it's possible to squeeze in a little sunlight throughout the day. Take a short walk outdoors between 11am - 3pm, open your blinds to let the natural light shine through, or use a daylight-simulation bulb.

**Exercise regularly.** Lowered production of serotonin can contribute to SAD symptoms such as feeling tired or sluggish. Take steps to prevent this by including exercise in your daily routine. Regular exercise can increase serotonin and endorphins to help improve your mood and mental health. Whether you decide to try yoga, weight lifting, or walking, aim for at least 30 minutes of exercise per day!

**Eat your fruits & veggies.** Lack of energy, overeating, and cravings for starchy or sweet foods are common symptoms of SAD that can lead to weight gain. Load up your plate with fresh fruits and veggies to help keep your energy levels up. Curb your sugar cravings with oatmeal, whole grain bread, brown rice, and bananas!

For more tips on combating SAD, read the full article [here](#).

## Prevalence of SAD

In a given year, **5%** of the US population experiences SAD, and the prevalence in a population ranges from **0-10%** depending on the geographic region. Typically the further one is from the equator the more at risk they are for SAD. Of those experiencing SAD, **4 out of 5** are women. Typically the age of onset is between 20-30 years, but symptoms can appear earlier.



Source: [Mental Health America](#)

## Risk Factors & Causes

While anyone can experience SAD, certain factors are associated with a higher risk. Those with a family history of depression or mental illness are more likely to develop SAD. If you have been diagnosed with depression or bipolar disorder, your symptoms may worsen during the winter months. Younger adults have a higher risk of SAD than older adults, and SAD is diagnosed four times more often in women than men.

Darkness triggers increased production of melatonin, a sleep-related hormone. Increased melatonin production affects an individual's circadian rhythm, or one's sleep-wake cycle, and can cause your internal and external clocks to become out of sync, leading to lack of energy and sleep issues. The reduced level of sunlight during the winter months may also lower serotonin production, which has been linked to depression. For more information about causes and risk factors associated with SAD, click [here](#).



## Put Your EAP to Work

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