

The Winter Blues

AKA SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

Winter in Canada brings many changes to our daily experience. The days get shorter and greyer. The weather is colder and leads us to spend more time indoors. This transition of season can lead to changes in the quality of our daily experience. Some of us start to notice a dip in energy levels, an increase in irritability and other symptoms that we tend to associate with feeling down or depressed. This usually starts to take hold in the fall as we get less and less sunlight. A common term for this experience is the “winter blues” – a period of general malaise characterized by the symptoms mentioned above. A more severe label, **Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)**, can be diagnosed when the experience is severe enough to affect our ability to function in day-to-day life.

WHAT CAUSES THE WINTER BLUES/SAD?

The jury is still out on the exact causes for the winter blues or SAD. There is evidence to indicate that exposure to sunlight plays a large role. Our bodies react to sun exposure via our circadian rhythm. This is our “natural clock” that regulates many things, including mood, energy levels and sleep patterns. There is also evidence to suggest that direct sunlight exposure (which allows the body to absorb Vitamin D) affects chemicals in our brain and body (serotonin and melatonin), which play a role in regulating how we feel. There are others who study the winter blues and SAD who believe that there is not enough evidence to support this theory. In their opinion, mood changes during the winter season are more related to lifestyle changes that result from not being able to engage in the same outdoor activities/hobbies we are able to enjoy in the spring and summer. While the jury is still out as to the specific cause or causes, it is generally accepted that a combination of the factors mentioned above play a major role in the manifestation of either condition.



WHO MIGHT BE AFFECTED/DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN WINTER BLUES AND SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER?

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), or Depression with Seasonal Patterns, is a condition that comes and goes based on seasonal changes, appearing mostly in the fall and going away in the spring/summer. A less common form of SAD affects some people in the summer months and usually starts in the spring.

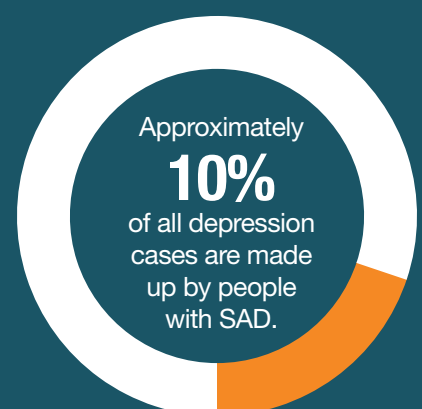
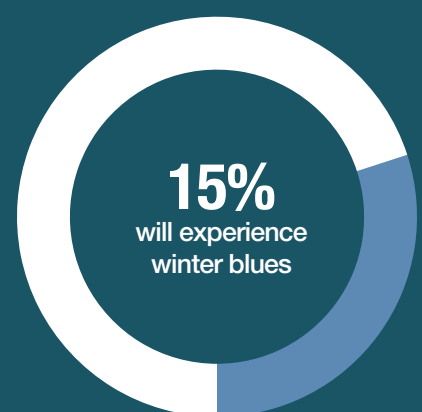
Approximately 2-3% of Canadians will experience SAD in their lifetime. Another 15% will experience the milder form, winter blues, that leaves them only slightly depressed, but still able to live their life without major disruptions. It is believed that people with SAD make up approximately 10% of all depression cases. There are some groups of people who are at higher risk of experiencing SAD:

ADULTS BETWEEN THE AGES OF 18-50 are at higher risk than both children and teenagers. After the age of 50, the risk of SAD starts to decline. The reasons for this are still unknown.

WOMEN may be more likely to experience SAD. Some reports indicate that women may be up to 9x more likely to be diagnosed than men.

GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION – People living in more northern locations are more likely to experience SAD than those living close to the equator. This connects to the research indicating that the amount of sunlight/daylight we are exposed to is a major factor in the onset of SAD.

PEOPLE WITH A HISTORY OF/PREDISPOSITION TO CLINICAL DEPRESSION – Those with a previous diagnosis of clinical depression are at a higher risk of developing SAD. It is also more common for individuals with a family history of clinical depression to experience SAD.



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WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF SAD?

Symptoms of SAD parallel the symptoms of depression. You may notice increased levels of irritability, and you may find yourself more sensitive and reactive in your relationships. It is common for stress levels to increase because of increased levels of distraction, sadness, and guilt. Many people report low energy levels and feeling tired, heavy, and lethargic. It is common to over-sleep during this time as our regular sleep schedule no longer provides adequate rest.

It is also common to notice changes in appetite with a particular craving for foods that are higher in carbohydrates, starch, and fat. As a result of eating more of these high-calorie comfort foods, some people experience weight gain.

A loss of interest in activities once enjoyed is also reported during these times, which can lead to a more sedentary and avoidant lifestyle. Physical intimacy and sex may become uninteresting or feel too demanding at this time.



HELPFUL STEPS TO PREVENT AND MANAGE SAD



LIFESTYLE CONSIDERATIONS

INCREASING EXPOSURE TO NATURAL LIGHT – Many of the lifestyle considerations designed to prevent or mitigate the winter blues/SAD are designed to increase the amount of light we are exposed to during the winter months. Seeking some type of daily outdoor activity or ritual during the daytime in the winter can be very helpful. You can also re-arrange your indoor environment so that you are exposed to a window during the day. Try to exercise near a window or outside if possible.

If possible, a VACATION TO A WARM AND SUNNY DESTINATION during January/February (these tend to be the most difficult months) can really help to prevent or recover from the winter blues.

INCREASED EXPOSURE TO THE SUN DURING SUMMER MONTHS can also help prevent the winter blues in the coming season. Increased sun exposure during the summertime allows the body to build up a repository of Vitamin D that it can use throughout the fall/winter months. Incorporating additional Vitamin D via diet and supplements is also recommended during the fall/winter months.

BUILDING MORE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY INTO YOUR LIFESTYLE, ideally before the winter blues or SAD symptoms take hold, is always a vital way to relieve stress, build energy and increase physical and mental well-being. If you become aware of the extra “comfort food” or increased sleep cravings that can come with the winter blues or SAD, do your best to avoid them and stick to your regular dietary and sleep routine.

MAINTAINING SOCIAL INTERACTION WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY – The symptoms of the winter blues and SAD can make this feel challenging at times. However, keeping in regular contact with friends and family, both in person and electronically, can provide valuable social opportunities to refresh your mood. Reaching out to people in your support network can combat feelings of loneliness, isolation, and guilt. When thinking about your leisure time, whether alone or with others, seek to incorporate activities that feel personally rewarding.



Research has found benefits from exposure to sunlight within **ONE HOUR FROM WAKING UP** in the morning, particularly for people with SAD.



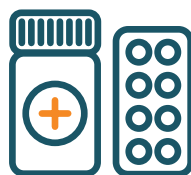
LIGHT THERAPY

Some studies have identified light therapy as an effective method for improving symptoms. This involves sitting in front of a special UV lamp for approximately 30 minutes per day. It can be administered in a doctor's office but also at home by purchasing your own equipment. It is important to consult with a doctor to follow a schedule that is recommended by a clinician. Light therapy may not be suitable for everyone. Some people have reported negative side-effects including eye strain, agitation, headaches, and nausea. If you are purchasing your own light therapy lamp, it is important to consult with a doctor/clinician to find the right one. Not all of them are effective. Several campuses have purchased light therapy lamps for common student-gathering areas such as libraries. For example, the University of Toronto has made these lamps available to students in one of their libraries. As mentioned above, it is important to proceed with caution when using a light therapy lamp and pay attention to any adverse reactions you may experience.



COUNSELLING/THERAPY

As with most mental health changes, therapy and counselling can play an important role. A variety of therapeutic modalities may be helpful for experiences of winter blues and SAD, and it is important to find the right fit for you. Most therapeutic approaches will bring awareness to the thoughts, moods, and feelings associated with changes in mood to break them down into more manageable components. Having an opportunity to discuss concerns and worries with a therapist in an open and safe environment can help identify potential feelings or experiences that could be influencing your symptoms. Once these have been identified, it opens the opportunity to work through them in a healthy and constructive way. Counselling and therapy are recommended as part of a treatment plan that includes the lifestyle changes mentioned above.



MEDICATION

A discussion with your doctor may open a conversation about potential medications to combat SAD. These are typically medications that fall under the anti-depressant umbrella. Through a mutual discussion, it may be decided that this option is the right step for you. It is likely that your doctor will recommend a combination of lifestyle and/or therapy prior to any plan to prescribe medication. These medications are typically only prescribed for experiences of SAD involving a significant impact on daily functioning. There can be side effects with medications that should be discussed with your doctor.



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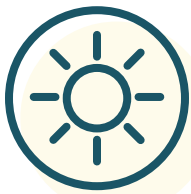
ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS: HOW YOU CAN DESIGN A HEALTHY LIVING SPACE FOR ANY SEASON

BIOPHILIC DESIGN

This is a term/concept within the building industry that emphasizes increasing building occupant connectivity to the natural environment through direct nature, indirect nature, and space and place conditions. The word “biophilia” was first introduced by Erich Fromm who defined it as, “the passionate love of life and of all that is alive, whether in a person, a plant, an idea or a social group.” In recent years, an increased amount of research has demonstrated that use of biophilic design principles can have a positive impact on mood, physical health and overall satisfaction.

Stephen Kellert, one of the pioneers of biophilic design, created a framework where nature in the built environment is used in a way that satisfies human needs. These principles (highlighted below) are meant to celebrate and show respect for nature and provide an enriching environment that is multisensory.

DIRECT EXPERIENCES OF NATURE IN OUR DAILY ENVIRONMENT



LIGHT

Allows for an orientation to the time of day and season.



ANIMALS

This can be done through aquariums, gardens, and animal feeders. Interaction with animals promotes interest, mental stimulation, and pleasure.



AIR

Ventilation, temperature, and humidity – how they are considered to promote comfort and productivity.



WEATHER

Seek ways for weather to be observed directly through windows and transitional spaces. Connection with weather promotes awareness and mental stimulation.



WATER

Multisensory and can be used in buildings to provide movement, sounds, touch, and sight.



NATURAL LANDSCAPES

This is done through the creation of self-sustaining ecosystems, most often gardens in our modern environment. Daily connection to these environments promotes wellness.



PLANTS

Bringing vegetation to interior spaces provides a direct relationship to nature. Plants have been proven to increase physical health, performance, and productivity and reduce stress.

INDIRECT EXPERIENCES OF NATURE IN OUR DAILY ENVIRONMENT

This generally refers to contact with images and/or representations of nature. Examples of this include paintings and artwork depicting natural landscapes and vistas. Incorporating natural materials in buildings using wood, stone and natural fabrics are also recommended.

Further to this principle, the use of natural colours (aka “earth-tones”) found in nature, which are often subdued tones of brown, green, and blue are calming and promote productivity. Incorporating furniture with “naturalistic shapes” such as columns and nature-based patterns on facades can change a static space into an appealing and complex area. The idea here is to evoke nature in the environment as much as possible. Search for ways to re-configure the space to mimic different plant heights found in ecosystems and/or mimic animal, water, or plant features.

Experience of space and place is another concept that uses spatial relationships to enhance well-being. For more information on this and the biophilic design principles mentioned above, there are several useful articles and texts in the reference section below.

INDOOR AIR AND LIGHT QUALITY

Combatting **Sick Building Syndrome (SBS)** and/or “building-related-symptoms” – The indoor spaces in which we work and live can have an impact on our overall health and wellness. A variety of factors are implicated in this, from the materials used in building construction, the quality and design of ventilation systems, the types of lights used and the overall exposure to natural light in the space. Air and light quality are the primary considerations when it comes to the impact a space has on our health. While SBS is more severe and typically related to much older buildings, it is possible to experience milder “building-related-symptoms” as we spend increased amounts of time indoors during the winter months. This is another reason to seek ways within each day to maximize our exposure to fresh air outdoors. To improve indoor air and light quality there are some relatively quick solutions. Portable HEPA and UV air filters can help clean the air in your workspace. When it comes to lighting, incandescent or halogen light bulbs are the “healthiest” indoor lights.



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