

# understanding



seasonal affective  
disorder (SAD)

## **Understanding seasonal affective disorder**

This booklet is for anyone who experiences seasonal affective disorder (SAD). It describes the symptoms and the different types of treatment available. It also suggests ways that you can help yourself, and what friends and family can do to help.

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### What is seasonal affective disorder (SAD)?

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that people experience at a particular time of year or during a particular season. It is a recognised mental health disorder.

Most of us are affected by the change in seasons – it is normal to feel more cheerful and energetic when the sun is shining and the days are longer, or to find that you eat more or sleep longer in winter.

However, if you experience SAD, the change in seasons will have a much greater effect on your mood and energy levels, and lead to symptoms of depression that may have a significant impact on your day-to-day life.

👉👉 *You struggle to cope with life, work and everyday tasks.* 🗨️🗨️

Most people experience SAD during the winter. Less commonly, some people find they experience SAD in reverse – with depressive symptoms occurring in summer.

SAD is most common in countries like the UK where there are large changes in the weather and daylight hours in the different seasons.

SAD can also worsen symptoms of existing depression that you experience throughout the year.

👉👉 *It's like having your own portable black cloud.* 🗨️🗨️

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### What are the common signs of SAD?

SAD has many different symptoms. You do not need all of them to be experiencing SAD. If a doctor gives you a diagnosis of SAD, it is likely to be because you have been experiencing a number of these symptoms in the same season for at least two or three years:

- lack of energy for everyday tasks, such as studying or going to work
- concentration problems
- sleep problems – such as sleeping for longer than usual or not being able to get to sleep
- depression – feeling sad, low, tearful, guilty, like you have let others or yourself down; sometimes feeling hopeless and despairing, sometimes apathetic and feeling nothing; see Mind's guide *Understanding Depression* for further information
- anxiety – tenseness and inability to cope with everyday stresses
- panic attacks
- mood changes – in some people, bursts of hyperactivity and cheerfulness (known as hypomania) in spring and autumn
- overeating – particularly 'comfort eating' or snacking more than usual
- being more prone to illness – some people with SAD may have a lowered immune system during the winter, and may be more likely to get colds, infections and other illnesses
- loss of interest in sex or physical contact
- social and relationship problems – irritability or not wanting to see people; difficult or abusive behaviour
- greater drug or alcohol use.

#### When might you experience SAD?

In the UK, you may start to get SAD symptoms between September and November and they may continue until March, April or May the following year. If you experience symptoms in reverse, they may begin around March and continue into the autumn.

👏👏 *When the sun comes out in spring my mood is immediately lifted. It's important to acknowledge that people cannot control this and it is more than 'winter blues'.* 🧡🧡

### What are the winter blues?

For some people, seasonal symptoms are fairly mild and usually concentrated in the middle of the winter – December, January and February. These symptoms are often known as the 'winter blues', or sub-syndromal SAD. This is very common, and many people see it as a natural part of living somewhere with large variations between seasons.

Many people don't feel that they need any particular treatment or support with 'winter blues' but most of the suggestions for self-care and treatment and support may be helpful to you. There is no clear dividing line between the 'winter blues' and SAD.

Some people find that their SAD symptoms vary a lot from year to year, while others find that they get better or worse as they get older.

A small percentage of people have very severe symptoms of SAD and find it hard to carry out day-to-day tasks in winter without continuous treatment.

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## What causes SAD?

The exact causes of SAD are still unclear. However, there are several theories about what causes SAD and why some people experience more severe symptoms than others:

- the effects of light
- disrupted body clock
- low serotonin levels
- high melatonin levels
- other possible triggers.

### The effects of light

When light hits the back of the eye, messages are passed to the part of the brain that controls sleep, appetite, sex drive, temperature, mood and activity. If there's not enough light, these functions are likely to slow down and gradually stop.

Some people seem to need a lot more light than others for their body to function normally. They are therefore more likely to develop SAD symptoms if there are low levels of light.

👩🏻👧🏻 *I like to think of Seasonal Affective Disorder as being solar powered – yeah it's pretty rubbish when winter comes around but it's nice to know things improve when the sun comes back.* 👩🏻👧🏻

### Disrupted body clock

Your brain sets your body clock by the hours of daylight. One theory is that if you experience SAD, the part of the brain that does this isn't functioning completely and so your body clock slows down, leading to tiredness and depression.

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However, as bright light (in the morning or from light treatment) appears to reduce symptoms of SAD, a problem with this part of the brain is unlikely to be the only cause of SAD.

### Low serotonin levels

The brain uses the chemical serotonin to regulate our mood.

People experiencing depression have been found to have lower levels of serotonin, particularly in winter. It is thought there may be particularly strong seasonal variations in how this process works in people with SAD.

### High melatonin levels

When it's dark, the brain produces the hormone melatonin which makes us sleep. When it becomes light again, it stops producing melatonin and we wake up.

It has been found that people with SAD produce much higher levels of melatonin in winter than other people. (This is also what happens to animals when they hibernate).

The relationship between melatonin and SAD is still unclear. We know that if someone with high melatonin levels is exposed to bright light, their melatonin levels drop to normal. However, trials have shown that even after their melatonin levels have returned to normal, they still experience the depressive symptoms of SAD. This suggests that melatonin is unlikely to be the only cause of SAD.

### Other possible triggers

Like other forms of depression, SAD has also been reported to have been triggered by:

- an unwelcome or traumatic life event, such as a major loss or bereavement, an assault, or by serious illness
- physical illness
- a change to diet or medication
- the use (or withdrawal from) street drugs and alcohol.

People who have lived near the equator for part of their lives and then moved to the UK seem to be particularly vulnerable to developing SAD.

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### How can I help myself cope with SAD?

Many people with SAD develop self-help strategies that enable them to manage the condition themselves, either on their own or with other treatment. You may find these suggestions helpful:

#### **Make the most of natural light**

We know that being outdoors throughout the winter doesn't cure SAD because people who work outside also experience SAD symptoms. However, it is still worth taking the opportunity to be exposed to natural light when possible.

Small changes – like going outdoors around midday or on bright days, wearing sunglasses a bit less (if it is safe to do so) and having pale colours within the home to reflect light – can all be useful.

●● *SAD is like a cold blanket that keeps depression and anxiety wrapped close to me. When I feel I can, I go outside and face the sun, close my eyes and focus on the light and warmth.* ●●

### Avoid stress

Many people find that they are more likely to experience stress in winter. If you find this time of year difficult, try to plan ahead to reduce your number of stressful or difficult activities during this time. Plan the more stressful events for summer where possible, particularly major ones such as changing jobs or moving home.

Take advantage of the times when you feel well in summer to prepare for the winter – for example, by buying Christmas presents or stocking up your kitchen cupboards.

If you can, try to make more spare time to rest, relax or do pleasant activities in the winter. Perhaps pamper yourself physically with a massage, or learn a relaxation technique to help you unwind. Our section on How to manage stress has further suggestions.

You may want to discuss your symptoms with your employer to try to minimise the pressures on you in the winter months. This is a very personal decision and not all people experiencing mental health problems choose to disclose them at work. Equally, your employer has responsibilities to assist you, including making 'reasonable adjustments' where appropriate. See Mind's guide *How to be mentally healthy at work* for more information.

### Build a support network

Think about joining a support group. Many support groups for depression will have members who experience SAD or who feel worse at certain times of the year. Sharing your experience with others who know what it's like

can be very therapeutic. Your GP or local Mind should be able to advise you about groups that may be suitable for you in your area.

Knowing that you are not alone and that help is available can make SAD easier to cope with. Get as much support as possible from your family and friends. Tell them about the condition, so they know what to expect and how to help. If your GP doesn't know about SAD, you can get more information from the organisations listed in 'Useful contacts' on p.18.

### **Exercise and eat well**

Try to keep physically active during the winter. While you may not feel like it at the time, physical activity can be very effective in lifting your mood and increasing your energy levels. It doesn't have to be anything particularly strenuous – doing housework, gardening or going for a gentle walk, if you are able to, can all help. Doing something physical outside in a green space, such as the park or the countryside, has been shown to be especially helpful.

A healthy diet is also important, and you should try to balance the common SAD craving for carbohydrates, such as pasta and potatoes, with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. Some people find that taking extra vitamin B12 or a Vitamin D supplement is also helpful.

### **Visit somewhere with more light**

If you can afford it, a holiday to a sunnier climate is likely to reduce symptoms.

However, you may find that on returning to the UK your SAD will temporarily become much worse. It seems that the contrast in light levels can sometimes do more harm than good, so if you have any doubts check with your doctor or the SAD Association before going away.

### Consider using a light box

Using a light box – a specialist device containing very bright fluorescent tubes – has been found to be an effective treatment for SAD because it increases your exposure to light during the winter months. Light boxes are usually at least 10 times the intensity of household lights. They are available in different strengths and sizes – for SAD, a strength of at least 2,500 lux is recommended but many people find 10,000 lux to be most effective.

People benefit from using a light box in different ways. Many people find that it is useful to use one every day but it is best to experiment to find a routine that works for you. You can use your light box at any time of day, although it's best not to use it in the hour or so before you go to bed as the effect of the light may make it hard to sleep.

Occasionally people report side effects from using a light box, such as headaches, irritability or, in very rare cases, nausea. Changing your position may help but if problems persist, you should stop using it.

If you have existing eye problems, you should check with your optician that a light box is safe for you to use. If you use a light box regularly, you should tell your optician and make sure that you have an annual eye check-up.

You cannot get light boxes on the NHS, so it's best to try one out before buying – manufacturers and suppliers may be able to offer you a free trial, or you could hire one for a short period first. Organisations like the SAD Association, [sad.org.uk](http://sad.org.uk) and the SAD Shop may be able to help.

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## What treatments are available for SAD?

If you find that you cannot manage your SAD symptoms yourself, or they are starting to have a significant impact on your day-to-day life, you might find it helpful to talk to your GP. They will be able to give you further information and discuss treatment options with you.

Your doctor should discuss all your treatment options with you, and your views and preferences should be taken into account when making decisions about your treatment. Treatments include:

- talking treatments
- antidepressants
- St John's wort
- bright light therapy
- specialist SAD services.

You may want to discuss your treatment with your GP regularly, particularly if symptoms worsen or do not improve after trying different options.

### Talking treatments

Talking treatments, such as counselling, psychotherapy or cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), can be extremely useful in helping people to cope with SAD symptoms. They can also help you recognise and deal with other factors that may be contributing to your symptoms.

Your GP should be able to give you information about talking treatments and refer you to a local practitioner. Waiting times for talking treatments on the NHS can be long, so you may choose to see a therapist privately. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) maintains a list of accredited practitioners (see 'Useful contacts' on p.18). Some offer a reduced fee for people on a limited income.

### Antidepressants

Antidepressant drugs work by increasing the activity of particular brain chemicals, such as noradrenaline and serotonin, which are thought to be involved with managing your moods. They don't cure SAD but can help you cope better with some of the symptoms.

If you are offered antidepressants, you will usually be offered SSRI (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor) antidepressants, such as paroxetine (Seroxat), citalopram, sertraline (Lustral) and fluoxetine (Prozac). SSRIs have been shown to be effective in treating severe cases of SAD but are not recommended as a treatment for mild or moderate SAD. They can be combined with light treatment and taken seasonally, so they have more effect during the winter. SSRI antidepressants have to be taken for around two to six weeks before becoming effective, so you may want to start taking them a few weeks before your symptoms usually begin to get the maximum benefit.

Occasionally you may also be offered older antidepressants, such as amitriptyline, imipramine and dosulepin, but these are not usually prescribed because they can increase symptoms like sleepiness. All antidepressants can cause side effects, so it is important to discuss these and the possible benefits of taking them with your GP before starting treatment. See Mind's pages on *Antidepressants* for further information.

### St John's wort

St John's wort is a popular herbal remedy that some people find helpful to deal with mild or moderate symptoms of SAD. However it may not be suitable for severe SAD or if you use a light box because it can make your skin very sensitive to light.

You shouldn't take St John's wort if you are taking prescription antidepressants. You should also seek advice from your GP or pharmacist

before using it with any other medication, as it can interfere with their effects. See Mind's pages on *St John's wort* for further details.

### Bright light therapy

Although you can use a light box to increase your light exposure yourself, in some cases, a more structured course of light therapy supervised by a medical professional may be useful.

While light therapy is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) for SAD, it is not usually available on the NHS. If it's not available in your area, a private health company may be able to provide it. Your GP should be able to advise you about what you can access in your area.

### Specialist SAD services

If you require more intensive support, your GP may refer you to a psychiatrist or service that specialises in treating SAD.

Unfortunately, there are only a few NHS clinics specifically for SAD available, so it can be difficult to get a referral and you may have to wait a long time for an appointment.

## What can friends and family do to help?

*This page is for family and friends who want to support someone with SAD.*

SAD can have a major impact on someone's life, and leave them feeling very ill for much of the year. Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and worthlessness often mean that people avoid their friends and relatives rather than ask for help or support.

However, this is a time when they need your help and support the most. These ideas may help:

- encourage them to seek treatment
- give practical support
- give emotional support.

### **Encourage them to seek treatment**

Encouraging them to seek appropriate treatment is perhaps the most important thing that you can do. You can reassure them that it is possible to do something to feel better, but you need to do so in a caring and sympathetic way.

It can be important for some people to be reminded that SAD is a recognised mental health disorder like many others and that they have similar rights to treatment and support.

### Practical support

If you are able, you might want to offer practical support to help. For example, you could:

- take on household tasks, particularly if they need time for treatment such as seeing a counsellor or light therapy
- if they are taking antidepressants, help them to cope with any side effects where you can – for example, by letting them lie in if they have disturbed sleep
- be particularly sensitive about how many demands they can cope with – for example, avoid having large numbers of house guests at once during winter.

### Emotional support

As well as practical steps, you can show that you care and offer emotional support by listening empathetically, by being affectionate, by appreciating them or simply by spending time with them.

Even with support, someone with SAD may be irritable at times or find it difficult to relate to other people. It can be hard to support someone if they do not appear to appreciate the help you are trying to offer. You may find that you need to be a bit more patient than usual. Try not to blame the person for being depressed, or tell them to 'pull themselves together'. They are probably already blaming themselves and criticism is likely to make them feel even worse. Remember that, with help and understanding, they are likely to feel better in time.

Supporting a friend or relative can be difficult, and you may want to seek support to help you cope. There may be a local support group for people in a similar situation, or you might want to talk to your GP about getting help for yourself. See Mind's booklet *How to cope as a carer* for more information.

## Useful contacts

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### British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

01455 883 300

[itsgoodtotalk.org.uk](http://itsgoodtotalk.org.uk)

Details of accredited therapists in your area.

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### NHS Choices

[nhs.uk](http://nhs.uk)

Further information about SAD.

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### SAD Association

[sada.org.uk](http://sada.org.uk)

SAD information and support.

## Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk) or contact Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)

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