

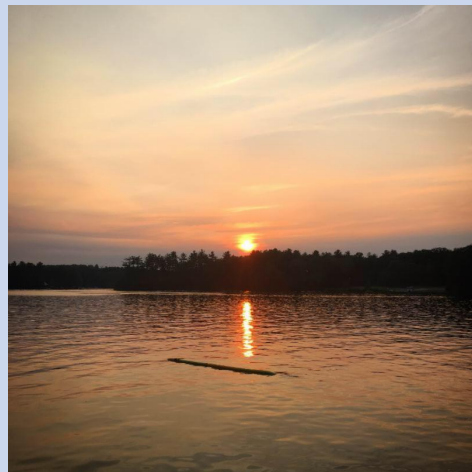


So SAD
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Feeling down and blue for no clear reason?
Perhaps you have seasonal affective disorder.

From the Mayo Clinic website:
Signs and symptoms of SAD may include:

- Feeling depressed most of the day, nearly every day
- Losing interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Having low energy
- Having problems with sleeping
- Experiencing changes in your appetite or weight
- Feeling sluggish or agitated
- Having difficulty concentrating
- Feeling hopeless, worthless or guilty
- Having frequent thoughts of death or suicide



Symptoms specific to winter-onset SAD, sometimes called winter depression, may include:

- Oversleeping
- Appetite changes, especially a craving for foods high in carbohydrates
- Weight gain
- Tiredness or low energy

Mayo Clinic also mentions summer and spring seasonal affective disorder, although in my experience this is a much more rare condition and is usually tied to specific mental health disorders, such as bipolar disorder. In this article I'm going to be focusing on what's classically known as SAD: the fall and winter blues.

What makes this happen?

Before I really understood SAD, I would find myself bundling up in the middle of winter in tons of layers, getting piles of blankets and lying out on the chaise lounge in the 20° weather just to feel the sun on my face. Shortly after one of these sessions, I was teaching a course at McGill University in Montreal (not the sunniest town), and after relaying this story my professor friend she said, "Oh, don't you realize you have SAD?" That began my journey to understand what was causing my sunny disposition to feel so cloudy.

It seems that women get SAD more than men, younger people more than older, and there seems to be a genetic predisposition towards it. Other factors causing the misery include the effect that less sunlight has on serotonin as well as melatonin levels. The lack of light really messes with your biological clock. I, for one, feel that changing clocks back-and-forth to daylight savings and standard time make things even worse. It makes our body do twice the adjustment!

In northern and southern climates with the winter bringing less sun and less hours of daylight, folks need to deal with SAD. I lived in Norway for a month and was there for the summer solstice. I found it profoundly disturbing that the sun never went down— each night at midnight it dipped to the horizon and then came back up. If you went to a restaurant, there were plastic bags taped on the windows so it appeared to be dark. I can only imagine the winter experience, when the northern half of the country has only two hours of sun, from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.. Maybe that's why the Norwegians are so hardy. Or why so many of them holiday in the Caribbean in the winter.

If you are prone to SAD, the biggest risk factor is distance from the equator. As I often say to people, "It's a latitude issue." The farther you are from the equator north or south, the more likely you are to have Seasonal Affective Disorder.

What can we do about it?

The easiest and most effective treatment is to get a light box. It takes a little research to find one with broad-spectrum light that mimics natural sunlight. They are inexpensive and easy to use. You want to use it in the morning shortly after you get up— if you use it too late in the day it can disturb your sleep cycle. I usually suggest putting the SAD light where you're going to eat breakfast. If you turn it on and eat a slow breakfast, you can get the light your body needs to build the chemicals it would normally get from the sun. This should take about a half an hour. The light must get into your eyes— it's not enough to just get it on your skin. That doesn't mean that you should stare at the light, just that the light should have access to your eyes, so placing it about a foot away from you at an indirect angle works very nicely.

There is one trick to avoiding SAD. You should start using your light as soon as the days start getting shorter— say September for those of us in the northern half of the world— and stop using it when the days are getting longer, probably April in the northern climates.

Severe cases of SAD are treated with medication, but I will tell you that for the most part the light therapy works really well. You are basically replacing what you're missing, which is of course the easiest way to fix something. There is also some good evidence that vitamin D supplementation helps as well.

Let the sunshine in and stay "delighted!"

Namaste,

Wendy

COVID note: It's very, very, VERY important to booster if vaccinated, and if not vaccinated to mask as much as possible. Michigan hospitals this week reported that of the deaths that they had in hospital, 75% were unvaccinated people and 25% were people who were vaccinated but not boosted. Enough said.