



Enriching Lives

A.C.T. NEWSLETTER

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Seasonal Affective Disorder Awareness Month –Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that appears during fall and/or winter. Seasonal affective disorder is the direct result of a biochemical imbalance in the hypothalamus as a result of shortening of daylight hours and less sunlight in the winter. When SAD is mild, it is referred to as the ‘winter blues.’ If SAD becomes severe it can disrupt functioning to the same extent as a major depression.

General signs and symptoms of SAD. To qualify for a diagnosis of SAD, symptoms must occur for three consecutive years during the same season. The following list includes signs and symptoms characteristic of seasonal affective disorder:

- **Depression:** Feelings of sadness, misery, apathy, guilt, hopelessness, despair and loss of self-esteem
- **Anxiety:** Nervousness, tension and difficulty dealing with stress
- **Mood fluctuations:** Changes in mood and short periods of hypomania (over-activity) in spring and autumn
- **Social isolation:** Irritability and loss of interest in engaging socially
- **Lethargy:** Feeling of fatigue, loss of energy, difficulty carrying out normal daily activities
- **Sleep problems:** Difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, waking early or oversleeping
- **Eating problems:** More often, overeating, craving carbohydrates and sweet foods contributing to weight gain or lack of appetite leading to weight loss
- **Loss of pleasure:** Decreased interest in pleasurable activities

Therapeutic services to assist in SAD. Suffering from seasonal affective disorder can be very debilitating. Several therapeutic treatments are available to assist individuals struggling with SAD. The three most widely used treatment approaches are light therapy, psychotherapy and psychopharmacology.

Coping and Support. Given that SAD is a recurring seasonal mood disorder, it is imperative that the individual receive quality treatment to address the current mood disorder and incorporate preventative measures to decrease the chances of a reoccurrence. The therapies mentioned below can be used in conjunction.

- **Light Therapy.** Light bulbs of a specific brightness have been effective in 85% of SAD cases.
- **Psychotherapy.** Psychotherapy may be used to teach the individual constructive coping skills, provide psycho-education, and create a plan of action to address the current mood disorder and prevent future relapse.
- **Psychopharmacology.** Non-sedative selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) drugs are useful in alleviating the symptoms of depression and are more efficacious when used in combination with light therapy.

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