



Work Smart Live Smart

When You Fall Back Into Darkness Light Up Your Life

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“Fall back” will have an incredible impact for thousands that are plagued by Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) come Daylight Savings Time in October. Many, reportedly 65% of the Canadian population, notice a difference in their level of mood and energy in the fall and winter compared to the sunny days of summer. Further research in Ontario suggests that between 2% and 5% of the general population may have SAD and another 15% have a less severe experience described as the “winter blues”.

The shortening days of late autumn can be the beginning of a type of clinical Depression called “Seasonal Affective Disorder”, or SAD. It is usually characterized by feelings of sadness, anxiety, and lethargy caused in part by the overproduction of melatonin, a sleep hormone produced by the brain and the impact to serotonin, which is a neurotransmitter. Symptoms may also include irritability, cravings for sweet or starchy foods, and significant weight gains. Studies put forward that SAD is more common in northern countries, where the fall and winter day is shorter and where many people do not spend time outside in the natural daylight.

What Causes SAD?

Research into the direct causes of SAD is ongoing. However, SAD is thought to be related to seasonal changes in the amount of daylight we are exposed to. A “biological internal clock” in the brain regulates our circadian (daily) rhythms and the production of neurotransmitters that affect our sleep, mood, and appetite. When we were hunters and gathers the sun controlled our activities. We were active when the sun shone and we slept when it set. In our modern society, the sun no longer controls our activities. We go to work when it is dark and arrive home at night long after the sun has set. We work indoors with poor lighting and hardly ever venture into the path of sunlight. Though we don’t follow the sun, our internal biological clocks may still be telling our bodies to sleep more as the days shorten. This internal clock puts our body out of step with our daily work schedules and family life.

What are the Symptoms?

SAD can be difficult to diagnose until a pattern is recognized, since many of the symptoms are similar to those of other types of depression. These symptoms are long lasting, interfere with the individual's everyday living and may include:

- Changes in appetite
- Craving for sweet or starchy foods
- Weight gain
- Decreased energy
- Fatigue
- Tendency to oversleep
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability
- Feelings of anxiety and despair
- Thoughts of death and suicide

The symptoms of SAD generally occur between the months of October to April. For some the symptoms affect them for the whole time, for others, only a particular couple of weeks or month is hard.

How is SAD Treated?

Many of us find ourselves with lower energy and mood during this time of year. We would benefit from spending more time outdoors during the day, by arranging our environments so that they receive more natural light, and by taking better care of our physical needs. Take a 'light break' instead of a coffee break. Move your furniture so that you sit near a window. Installing full-spectrum lights to lamps and light fixtures can also help. Take care of your physical needs by eating properly and getting regular amounts of sleep to raise your energy level and buffer your mood.

If you have felt the more severe symptoms associated with SAD for more than a couple of weeks during autumn and/or winter you should seek professional help, especially if you find yourself thinking about death and suicide. Many people with Seasonal Affective Disorder respond well to exposure to bright, artificial light. A high fidelity light source of 10,000 LUX works by providing daylight balanced, soothing, glare-free light in a concentrated "dose" which affects the hormones and neurotransmitters involved in SAD. "Phototherapy", or light therapy, is about 10 to 20 times brighter than the average office and involves sitting beside this special light box for about 30 minutes a day. Within a couple of weeks 70% of those with SAD experience a noticeable reduction in their symptoms. As with any medical procedure, a health care professional should be consulted before beginning light therapy.

Increasing your exposure to light, monitoring your diet, sleep patterns and exercise levels are important first steps in maintaining your health and regulating your Circadian Rhythms.

For those who are severely affected by SAD, devising a treatment plan with a health care professional consisting of light therapy, medication and/or therapy may help to relieve these depressive symptoms.

Stress and wellness specialist, **Beverly Beuermann-King** translates current research and best practices information into a realistic, accessible and practical approach through her dynamic stress and wellness workshops, on-line articles, e-newsletters and media interviews and through a collaboration called *Awakening The Workplace*. Visit www.WorkSmartLiveSmart.com for more on Beverly and her wellness work.

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