



# *Work Smart Live Smart*

## *Season Of Darkness*

By  
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**Have you noticed a change in your mood or energy since the clocks went back? For many of us, daylight savings time heralds the beginning of the winter blues and, in some cases, the more severe Seasonal Affective Disorder. Healthy Ontario's stress and wellness expert, Beverly Beuermann-King sheds some light on what, for many, is a season of darkness.**

If you notice a difference in yourself at this time of the year-- perhaps you feel more tired, lethargic or even sad, you aren't alone. Some 65% of Canadians say they notice a change in their energy level and their mood in the fall and winter compared to the sunny days of summer. Here in Ontario, 15% of us suffer from the "winter blues" while a small number, between 2% and 5%, have the more severe Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

SAD is a type of clinical depression. It is usually characterized by feelings of sadness, anxiety, and lethargy caused in part by the overproduction of melatonin, a sleep hormone in the brain and its impact on serotonin levels. Symptoms may also include irritability, cravings for sweet or starchy foods, and significant weight gains. Studies suggest that SAD is more common in northern countries, where the fall and winter days are shorter and where many people do not spend much time outside in the natural daylight.

### **What Causes SAD?**

Research into the direct causes of SAD is ongoing. However, scientists believe it is related to seasonal changes in our exposure to daylight. 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 gatherers 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 real sunlight. While we no longer 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 and April. Some people will be affected for that entire period. Others may only notice a change for a couple of weeks or a month.

## **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 bulbs in 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 feel 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 including 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](http://www.WorkSmartLiveSmart.com) for more on Beverly and her wellness work.

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