

Brutal cold, short days, post-holiday letdown raise risk of depression

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The first Monday after the holidays can be a depressing time for people coping with the post-holiday letdown and a type of depression triggered by short days called seasonal affective disorder (SAD).

And this year the first Monday will be especially blue, due to the added stress of the brutal cold in the forecast, said Loyola University Medical Center psychiatrist Dr. Angelos Halaris, who specializes in treating [depression](#).

"All these factors will have a cumulative effect," Halaris said. "We could see an uptick in depression this coming week and for the rest of the month."

For many people, the holidays are a time of too much eating and drinking, combined with family stresses and relationship issues. They begin the new year mentally and physically exhausted.

For people affected by [seasonal affective disorder](#), energy and mood take a nose dive during the short days of winter. "SAD is characterized by depression, exhaustion and lack of interest in people and regular activities," Halaris said. "It interferes with a person's outlook on life and ability to function properly."

Environmental stresses, such as brutally cold weather, can help trigger depression in people who already are vulnerable due to SAD, post-holiday blues or other factors, Halaris said.

SAD is thought to be related to a chemical imbalance in the brain, brought on by lack of light due to winter's shorter days and typically overcast skies.

"With less exposure to light in the winter months, many people become depressed," Halaris said. "Those susceptible to SAD are affected even more so."

Halaris said that bright light affects brain chemistry in a helpful way and acts as an antidepressant. If you can stand the cold, get outside during the day, even if it is overcast. At home, open the drapes and blinds to let in natural light.

SAD can be effectively treated with light therapy, [antidepressant medication](#) and/or psychotherapy, Halaris said. The latest treatment is a headband containing mounted lights that delivers light to your retina whether you are inside or outdoors.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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