

Does an early winter warmup help or hurt those with seasonal depression?

March 14 2017, by Alison Bowen, Chicago Tribune

Chicagoans have been blessed with warm weather early this year. Record-breaking temperatures in February had people playing tennis, flocking to the lake path and even sunbathing in swim trunks.

But winter isn't letting us off the hook that easily. On Friday, the forecast low was a frigid 17 degrees - a temperature bound to feel even colder on the heels of recent warm spurts.

So what, if any, effect do these weather swings have on seasonal depression? Is a taste of [warm weather](#) in winter more likely to help or hurt?

Well, it depends.

"When you do get that first bout of warm weather, the hope is sort of planted of what's to come," said Dr. Reba Peoples, a Minneapolis psychiatrist. "So there's definitely a dashed sense of hope and expectation when we do have that cold again."

Peoples noted that [seasonal affective disorder](#), or SAD, is rooted not in temperature, but in a lack of natural sunlight. In the winter, when days are shorter, we receive less sunlight. This is what can trigger sadness associated with the disorder. Symptoms include sleepiness or finding it harder to carry out daily tasks. Appetites can change.

In its milder form, SAD can affect up to 20 percent of people, said

Leonard Jason, a professor of clinical psychology at DePaul University.

It's possible that warmer weather can alleviate [seasonal depression](#) earlier - warmer days might mean more sunlight, for example. And the days are getting longer. This weekend, when daylight saving time kicks in, we'll enjoy even more light at night.

Warmer days also allow people to get outside more, and that alfresco activity and accompanying exercise can boost moods, Jason said.

"The more we can be outside and be active generally, the better our mental health," he said. But "when you're used to something and then all of a sudden you lose it, that loss is felt."

How much that loss hurts varies widely from person to person.

"We have a tremendous amount of individual variation of how people cope with weather changes," Jason said.

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