

Does the time of year really impact your mood?

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When daylight saving time ends in late fall, it is common to start experiencing an onset of mild depressive feelings and tendencies, often coined as "winter blues." Energy levels seem to decrease with the temperature drop, people tend to feel more tired and sluggish, and there is an element of dread that occurs when one's drive home from work is

completely in the dark.

While 90 percent of people have these feelings each year, some do not realize they are actually experiencing seasonal affective disorder.

What is seasonal affective disorder?

According to the [American Psychiatric Association](#), [seasonal affective disorder](#), or SAD, is a form of seasonal or winter depression, with people experiencing mood changes and symptoms similar to depression. The symptoms usually occur during the fall and winter months—most often January and February—when there are decreased amounts of sunlight.

"When you look at animals and how our ancient ancestors lived, it's a normal response to hibernate in the winter months when sunlight is scarce," said Richard Shelton, M.D., professor in the University of Alabama at Birmingham Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurobiology. "Many people experience fatigue or sleepiness in the winter. SAD is associated with an intensification of those feelings, along with a depressed mood."

For those who experience SAD in any capacity, its onset is typically yearly during the same two-week period, while the offset similarly occurs during the same two-week period when spring arrives. Because of this consistency, it is easy to for people to track when their feelings shift on a seasonal basis.

Depending on a person's distance from the equator, their SAD state can last for a longer or shorter duration, if at all. Typically, the average American will experience SAD from mid-November through March, and it impacts adults more than children.

Do I have seasonal affective disorder?

Shelton says a majority of people will experience SAD at some point during the winter months, so it is important to know if your [feelings](#) are normal, or if you may need to seek medical attention.

"Everyone can experience tiredness during the winter and a feeling of low energy, but it's when a person can't accomplish basic tasks that SAD has crossed a threshold," Shelton said. "For instance, it can be normal to be sleepy at your desk at work during the winter; but those with more SAD may have difficulty accomplishing anything at work or even making it to work."

- Normal winter symptoms include but are not limited to:
- Increased tiredness
- Sleeping too much
- Mild weight gain and increased craving for carbohydrate-based foods
- Decrease in normal energy amounts
- Difficulty in feeling up to typically enjoyable activities like exercising

SAD symptoms that warrant medical attention:

- Inability to enjoy everyday activities
- Depressed mood
- Tiredness that interferes with life and job functionality
- Inability to physically or emotionally complete everyday tasks, attend work

Shelton notes that for many Southeastern states this year, the intense gray, rainy weather that has lasted for months has added to the SAD intensification many people are feeling.

Treatment options

While exposure to the sun and vitamin D helps improve mood, energy levels and quality of life, there are other ways people experiencing SAD can get [light](#) exposure during [winter months](#).

Light therapy—which includes the use of light boxes—is a common and easy way to mimic natural sunlight during the [winter](#), especially as many people miss peak sunlight hours while at work. A light box emits a measurement of about 10,000 lux, and people are encouraged to use it for 30 minutes each morning.

"We know that, for the [average person](#), the more [light exposure](#) they get means the less depression they may experience," Shelton said. "While [light therapy](#) doesn't replace natural sunlight and its benefits, many people see improvements in energy and mood fairly quickly."

While light boxes are an accessible, safe and inexpensive treatment of choice, Shelton explains that, for some people experiencing SAD effects, an anti-depressant regimen may be helpful. In some instances of SAD, light therapy may lead to mania, so it is important to discuss the treatment with a physician.

If you are able to take a walk on your lunch break and get a few minutes of natural sunlight, that could be a benefit and help alleviate SAD as well.

Shelton adds that, once the season starts to change to spring, a person's mood and [energy levels](#) will naturally rise once again, timed with longer days, more sunlight and warmer temperatures. If a person notices that their SAD is still persistent once spring is fully in place, Shelton recommends they talk to their primary health care provider about seeing a specialist.

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

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