

Seasonal depression: Why it happens and how to manage the symptoms

November 15 2021, by Harriet Bowyer



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

With the weather getting colder and the days becoming shorter, some people are noticing they have less energy and aren't feeling as positive as they usually do. While these feelings may be temporary for some, around [one in three people](#) consistently struggle through the autumn and winter months with a type of depression known as [seasonal affective](#)

[disorder](#) (SAD).

Symptoms of SAD can vary from mild to severe, but typically include:

- Low mood,
- Loss of interest or pleasure in things you previously enjoyed,
- Change in appetite (usually eating more than usual),
- Change in sleep (typically too much sleep),
- Feeling worthless.

Researchers aren't yet clear on what causes SAD, but it's likely to be complex and multifaceted. Some [research](#) suggests it could be due to a [malfunctioning hypothalamus](#) (the area of the brain that regulates biological processes such as mood, sleep and appetite) or [producing too much melatonin](#) (a hormone which controls our sleep-wake cycle, which is produced by the brain's pineal gland). Some researchers theorize it could also be due to having a [disrupted circadian rhythm](#)—the natural, internal process that regulates our sleep-wake cycle.

Of course, there may be other factors at play too. For example, some research has indicated that women may be [more likely](#) to experience SAD—though, due to a lack of specific research, it's uncertain whether these [gender differences](#) really exist and if so, why.

Getting through it

Some people notice that their symptoms start to improve when the seasons begin to change and spring approaches. But this doesn't mean that there aren't many things people can do during the winter months to help them cope with their symptoms.

For people with SAD, the main [recommended treatments](#) include psychological interventions (such as talking therapies) or taking

medication (such as an antidepressant). Research shows that [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) (which focuses on challenging our distressing thoughts and changing our behavior) is an [effective treatment](#) for SAD and that the effects may last longer than other [treatment options](#)—such as [light therapy](#), another SAD treatment, which involves sitting in front of, or below, a box which emits a very [bright light](#) for around 20 minutes or more daily. In this particular study, the researchers found that compared to [light therapy](#), CBT was associated with significantly lower depression when followed up one year later.

A key part of CBT is supporting patients in a technique called [behavioral activation](#), which aims to improve mood by encouraging people to structure their day and engage in meaningful, pleasurable activities—a hobby, for example. Research also indicates that [certain antidepressants](#) (specifically SSRIs) may be particularly effective in treating symptoms of SAD.

Light therapy is also currently being investigated as a treatment for SAD. Given it's still an emerging therapy, research regarding its effectiveness as a standalone treatment for SAD [remains inconsistent](#). But one study has shown that light therapy can be an effective way of [managing SAD symptoms](#) when used in combination with antidepressants. Light therapy is not usually available on the NHS, so if you do want to try it be sure to only choose a product that is medically approved for the [treatment](#) of SAD—and follow instructions for use or consult your GP.

Aside from seeking professional help, there are a couple of other things that people can do to help them cope with SAD during their day.

Going outside and getting some natural daylight is one thing people experiencing SAD can do for themselves. According to one study, getting more natural light during the day [may help improve symptoms](#). The researchers of the study had participants either go for a daily one-

hour outdoor walk, or use a low-dose artificial light box for 30 minutes per day for a period of one week. The participants who went for a daily walk showed significant improvements in all depressive symptoms, compared to those exposed to artificial light. While it's uncertain exactly why daylight may improve symptoms, this may still be an easy and effective thing that people can do to improve their mood each day.

[Research](#) also shows that lifestyle factors (such as [exercise levels](#) and diet) can play an important role in both causing and managing depression. When it comes to SAD in particular, there's some [evidence](#) to suggest that exercising (on it's own or in combination with light therapy), may improve symptoms. Again, it's still unclear why this is the case. But research has indicated that it may be related to changes in our [circadian rhythm](#). A review which looked at the [impact of exercise](#) on depression has pointed to both the psychological (such as exercise providing distraction from negative thoughts and a means to socialize) and physiological (such as changes in endorphin or cortisol levels) benefits.

While there are many things people can do to manage symptoms of SAD throughout the winter months, it's important to consult your GP about symptoms and feelings—especially if symptoms don't improve, or if the condition becomes difficult to manage.

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