

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD): Do you suffer from the Winter Blues?

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While many of us grumble and complain as the days turn shorter and we bundle up to prepare for the cold dreariness of winter, more than half a million Canadians every year suffer from a condition called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). These individuals notice a significant change in their behaviour and mood that begins annually between September and November and lifts with the approach of springtime in March and April. The cluster of symptoms that defines SAD is depressed mood accompanied by at least some of the following:

- Carbohydrate cravings (especially for sweets and/or starches)
- Weight gain
- Fatigue
- Oversleeping or difficulty awakening in the morning
- Reduced work productivity
- Withdrawal from social contacts.

While SAD symptoms are similar to those of clinical depression, the important differentiation is the seasonal nature of the symptoms for the SAD sufferer in that difficulties emerge in the fall and are largely absent in the late spring and summer. As well, SAD sufferers are often described as “light hungry” and instinctively light their homes well or seek out sunny places and cheer up when there is a period of sunny weather. As with depression, however, there are degrees of severity within SAD sufferers and the impact on one’s life can be severe, including seriously disrupting one’s ability to work and maintain healthy relationships.

What causes SAD?

The exact causes of SAD remain unclear. However, it appears that this condition is related to how our bodies cope with the decreasing amount of daylight in the fall and winter seasons. It is suspected that SAD is inherited so a sufferer has a genetic vulnerability. The symptoms begin to show in persons with this genetic makeup when they experience lack of light. While for most people this occurs in the fall and winter seasons, the symptoms can also emerge in locations where there is prolonged cloudiness in the summer or when spending large amounts of time in a windowless or badly lit environment. Apart from the amount of light, it appears that stress can be another major trigger for SAD. Many sufferers have found that SAD first developed after a stressful life event such as a divorce, being fired, bereavement or even the birth of a new baby in the winter months.

More women than men suffer from SAD. It typically appears between the ages of twenty and forty. However, children and adolescents can also suffer from it.

Is there an effective treatment for SAD?

Apart from moving to a country close to the equator, the main way of controlling this disorder is by using light treatment, sometimes called phototherapy. There are several devices on the market today that will give the user exposure to intense, artificial bright light. Studies have reported that 85% of SAD sufferers respond to light treatment usually within 3- 5 days, particularly if the treatment is

begun at the early stages. Sometimes individuals benefit both from light therapy and more traditional forms of therapy that include the use of anti-depressants and counselling.

How HR Managers Can Help

Given that about 30 % of the population experience some mild form of SAD or the more regular winter blues, and 5 % suffer the full-blown disorder, it is important that information about this condition be shared with front line managers. While a manager's natural response to observing dramatic seasonal changes in a person's behaviour might be to think about the possibility of a serious psychiatric disorder, quite the reverse could be true, as SAD is a highly treatable physical condition. Employee Assistance Providers could provide lunch 'n learn seminars, or written information on this topic. This information would suggest the importance of ensuring that homes and offices have high levels of lighting making use of natural strip lights. At home, individuals should be encouraged to sit near a window whenever possible and decorate in light, reflective colours. Other tips are to make sure you get outside and benefit from what natural daylight there is during our winter season by taking a walk at lunchtime and watching your diet to control the carbohydrate cravings. Overloading on carbohydrates makes everyone slow down. Also, a very readable resource book is Norman Rosenthal's "Winter Blues".

If you have an employee you think might be suffering from SAD give them some information about the disorder and encourage them to talk to their family doctor or call their employee assistance program. If indeed they do suffer from this disorder, they will be supported to find local community resources that specialize in this highly treatable condition. Don't let your staff suffer the winter blues alone, increase their knowledge about SAD so that they can get the appropriate help.

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