

[IMAGE]

## **Keep Happy in the Winter: How to Avoid Seasonal Depression**

By Julie T. Chen, MD

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is when people experience symptoms of depression during the Fall and Winter months (winter depression) or Spring and summer months (summer depression). It is thought to occur due to the changes in duration of sunlight which then affects our circadian rhythm, serotonin levels and our melatonin levels.

These factors have an impact on our mood and if a person already has bipolar disorder or depression, they can still have SAD on top of that where it worsens their usual underlying baseline symptoms. For those without depression or bipolar disease, you may notice a low mood and symptoms of depression only during the months where the hours of sunlight are shorter than other times of the year.

What's interesting is that most people think SAD is only during winter time but it can also occur during summer time. Whenever shifts in season affects levels of serotonin, melatonin and our sleep cycle, the circadian rhythm, it is typically termed seasonal affective disorder.

Some of the risk factors for SAD are being female, living farther from the equator, family history of SAD or depression or bipolar disease, and also prior history of depression or bipolar disease. If you suspect that you may have this issue, you need to first seek the advice and help of a psychiatrist to help you confirm the diagnosis or clarify if your symptoms are from another cause. Once you have established that you do have SAD, there are some options for therapy.

winter - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Many of my patients in my integrative medicine clinic in San Jose CA ask about light therapy or phototherapy. That is a viable option and in my opinion, a great one since it involves something that targets the root of the problem and it doesn't involve taking drugs and potentially dealing with drug side effects. So, I am a fan of phototherapy, but other also very helpful and potentially essential therapeutic options are psychotherapy and medications.

The main thing to keep in mind is that you are not alone in your concerns and symptoms. Many people have variations of this disorder and so don't be shy about speaking up or even just questioning whether your symptoms can be helped with some of the therapeutic options. If you don't bring it up, how would we as

healthcare practitioners ever know to help you.

So, this winter season, if you are not feeling your best and you think you may have SAD, ask your doctor about it. You may notice that you might just be one therapeutic session away from feeling bright and sunny...even when it's not bright and sunny outside.

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