



Seasonal affective disorder

More than the winter blues

By Emily Harris

If you experience the winter blahs that coincide with shorter days and cooler weather, you're not alone. But if you suffer a major depressive episode when the seasons turn, you may be experiencing seasonal affective disorder (SAD), according to research by the American Psychiatric Association.

Usually when we think about seasonal affective disorder, we think depression, says Dr. John Beyer, director of Duke University's Mood and Anxiety Disorder Clinic in Durham, N.C. Depression is the most common type, he says. If a person has the onset of depression in the fall and winter, and it seems to lift by spring and summer, that's SAD. But if he or she shows manic symptoms, such as getting hyper in the spring and summer, that may be the more rare disorder, seasonal affective bipolar disorder.

What is it?

"We really have two mood disorders: manic-depressive episodes and bipolar disorders," Dr. Beyer says. "Bipolar disorders are usually cycling disorders, which means there are times in which a person may have episodes of mania or episodes of depression. They will cycle up or cycle down. For half the people that develop a major depressive episode, that may be the only episode they ever have. But just under half of the people who develop depression may develop another depressive episode. The one subtype is that if these depressive episodes appear to occur at the same time every year, that would be considered a cycle also, and if it's in the same season, that's where we would capture it and say this is seasonal affective disorder."

Seasonal affective disorder consists of depressive episodes that coincide with seasons, usually fall and winter, Dr. Beyer says. In most cases, it lifts with the arrival of spring and summer—the length of the day or the amount of sunlight the person's exposed to, or possibly the end of colder weather. Occasionally people can have cycling of their moods so that not only do they have down times related to the seasons, but the uplift that they may have in spring and summer is too much, and that's bipolar disorder, he says. "But for most seasonally associated mood changes we think about depression."

This is different from the holiday blues. Put simply, holiday blues are related to the stress around holidays, while seasonal affective disorder is related to the changes that occur in the season and how our bodies respond to that.

And, though it is rare, SAD can occur in the spring and summer or fall and winter, according to the Cleveland Clinic.

What causes it?

The cause is unknown. Research shows changes in the availability of sunlight plays an important role. Statistics show that winter depression becomes increasingly more common the farther people live north or south of the equator.

Studies in the United States have shown SAD to be most prevalent in the Northeast and along the Canadian border, where 9 percent of the population may be susceptible. In Alaska, it's at 9 percent. In the northern parts of the United States, there's an increase in symptoms of SAD without the full-blown disorder. This may be case of where people have symptoms or sub-symptoms without meeting the full criteria for SAD, Dr. Beyer says.

"People definitely feel that sense of weight when the seasons change, and that can be anywhere from 15 [percent] to 25 percent of the population, especially in the northern parts of the United States," he says. But he stresses that this is normal for the majority of the population.

SAD is the same as a major depressive episode, Dr. Beyer says. A study published in 2004 by the World Health Organization found

that depression affects 340 million people worldwide. "Major depression is one of the most debilitating diseases that we have in the world."

Do you have SAD?

According to the Cleveland Clinic, surveys estimate that 4 percent to 6 percent of the general population experiences SAD. Women with SAD outnumber men four to one. The disorder usually begins in person's early 20s and the risk for developing SAD decreases with age.

Doctors use criteria set by the American Psychiatric Association to diagnose SAD. The diagnosis is done over a period of years, but that doesn't mean you should wait on treatment for depression.

"Seasonal affective disorder occurs when a person meets the full criteria for depression," Dr. Beyer says. "They feel depressed, or they lack enjoyment of things they previously have enjoyed," he says. It may be "a sense of hopelessness or worthlessness or decreased energy that significantly interferes with their functioning." It can be so severe that the patient has recurrent thoughts about death or suicide.

It's not an unusual response for us to have a sense of letdown in the fall and winter, but that's not what a person with seasonal affective disorder feels. "Seasonal affective disorder is when the symptoms are severe enough that they interfere with normal functioning," he says.

There are no tests for SAD. "We make that diagnosis when a person has a pattern of recurrent depression that occurs at least at the same season for two consecutive years," Dr. Beyer says. "So really we make the diagnosis based on history and current presentation."

The first thing to do, he says, is see your family physician. Remember that the first symptom of SAD is a major depressive episode. Your doctor will be able to track your symptoms and prescribe medication. Your doctor will make sure the depression is not related to another physical problem, too, Dr. Beyer says.

Once your history has been tracked, your doctor will refer you to a psychiatrist who can help with the mood disorder treatment and treatment for a major depressive episode. And if it's documented and shown that these episodes relate to the change of seasons and that such episodes have been consistent, that would be documentation of major depressive episode.

When considering your case, if you have had an episode of depression every time the days get shorter and it gets colder, over a two or three-year period, it's probably seasonal affective disorder.

Treatment

If you are diagnosed with SAD, your doctor will go over options with you—from traditional medications and therapy to light therapy and daily exercise, Dr. Beyer says.

"One of the things that we're going to recommend for anyone with depression, especially seasonal affective disorder, are changes that they can do in their own lifestyle to try to improve this disease," Dr. Beyer says. "This will include things such as exercise and diet. Exercise has consistently been found to be helpful in treating mild to moderate depression. For most people with SAD, that's where they find themselves."

Dr. Beyer also suggests getting outside.

"Even on cloudy days, if you are outside," he says, "you get more exposure to the intensity of light than if you have the light box." ■