

ARE YOU SAD?

IT'S MORE THAN JUST A FEELING

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"I feel like sleeping all the time, and my brain seems to have left the building. I walk to the kitchen, can't remember what I was going to get, and then decide to grab the chocolate in the pantry. I *always* think about chocolate these days." --Julie, mom of two.

THE SAD FACTS

Like all types of depression, SAD is a label used to identify a collection of symptoms but tells us little about the underlying cause. Symptoms of SAD might include fatigue, changes in appetite including cravings for starch and sugar, weight gain, feelings of guilt, irritability, hopelessness, stress and tension, loss of libido, and social avoidance. But it's the cyclical nature of it and its response to light therapy that sets it apart from other types of depression.

First described in 1984, Seasonal Affective Disorder has been categorized as a special type of depression that follows a seasonal pattern. Most of the time it strikes in the short winter days, but some people report a worsening of symptoms in the spring and fall as well. It is more often reported in adults than children and teens, and is nine times more likely to affect women than men. After the age of 50, the risk starts to decline.

Julie had been feeling out of sorts lately and wondered if the forgetfulness and cravings for the sweet stuff were part of the general life changes that came with being a mom or if it could be something more. When I asked if these feelings were consistent, she reflected for a moment and then admitted, "Actually no...they've been coming on in the fall and I tend to feel better in the summer."

Upon further discussion it became clear that her moods had a cyclical nature, prompting me to suggest that Julie talk with her doctor about Seasonal Affective Disorder (or SAD).

SADDER BUT WISER

There are a few theories to explain potential triggers of this type of depression. It has been known to be hereditary, with 13–17% of people who develop SAD having an immediate family member who also experiences it. Genetic variants that reduce the body's ability to use dopamine beta hydroxylase to convert dopamine to norepinephrine, or issues with serotonin receptor sites exacerbated by seasonal changes are theories being explored.

Other research points to a lack of sunlight as a major cause. Given that people living at Northern and Southern latitudes report SAD more often than do people living near the equator, and also that light therapy has been shown to be very effective at resolving symptoms, this seems a reasonable hypothesis. SAD has also been reported in equatorial climates by people who spend time mostly inside with air conditioning to avoid the heat.

Still other studies point to low levels of serotonin (the "happy hormone"), nutritional deficiencies, abnormal melatonin (a sleep hormone) patterns, and inflammation as root issues which when resolved can lift the depressed mood. Intense cravings for carbohydrates like bread, pasta, wine, and sugar is a common symptom expressed by SAD sufferers, and may be in part because carbohydrates stimulate the transport of tryptophan to the brain where it can be converted into serotonin (most of our serotonin is made in the gut, but a small amount is also made in the brain).

BREAKING SAD

There are myriad contributors to SAD, so if Julie's story of cyclically recurring depressive symptoms resonates with you, talk to your doctor about your symptoms. There are also some simple diet and lifestyle strategies you can implement to help ease the symptoms.

HAPPIER HABITS

FOOD FOR HAPPY THOUGHTS: Consciously and mindfully consuming a diet that is high in fibre, healthy fats and protein, and low in carbohydrates can help reduce symptoms associated with SAD. In fact, a 2017 study found that this type of modified Mediterranean diet when followed for 12 weeks was effective at resolving many cases of clinical depression.

REST EASY: Take steps to reset the circadian rhythm by creating a strict bedtime routine. Use blue-light blocking glasses and avoid screen time altogether one hour before bed. Invest in blackout blinds to ensure your sleeping space is completely dark and incorporate gratitude, deep breathing, and essential oils into your routine to ease the body into sleep by activating the parasympathetic branch of the nervous system (also called our "rest, digest, and repair system").

LIGHT UP YOUR LIFE: Expose your skin to a little light therapy to reset both your circadian rhythm and the hormones associated with depression. Get outside more during daylight hours or try a full spectrum light to make up for lack of sunlight in winter months. With light therapy it's generally recommended to start with one 10- to 15-minute session per day, then increase to 30 to 45 minutes a day, depending on the response. (Caution: for those with bipolar disorder, the light may trigger mania, so talk with your doctor first.)

SUNNIER SUPPLEMENTS

TRYPTOPHAN or 5-HTP are amino acids available in protein-rich foods like salmon, eggs, and chicken. As the building blocks for serotonin and melatonin, the primary hormones associated with SAD, they can help regulate mood. Moderately increasing your intake of tryptophan-rich foods is quite safe but check with your doctor before using 5-HTP or tryptophan as a supplement, especially if you are already on a serotonin re-uptake inhibitor (SSRI) medication, as too much serotonin can be dangerous.

VITAMIN D is needed to help modulate inflammation and regulate serotonin and melatonin in our bodies, and low blood levels of vitamin D may be what is triggering symptoms of SAD or other kinds of depression. Food sources like egg yolks, liver, sardines, and mackerel are great vitamin D-rich additions to your diet (along with getting plenty of sunshine, of course). If you don't eat those foods consider a quality supplement that includes vitamin K2, as they work synergistically.

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OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS help modulate inflammation which might be why they help ease depression. While research into omegas' effect on depression, specifically with regards to SAD, is still in its infancy, there is considerable evidence that deficiency in this type of fatty acid is associated with general depression, including the postpartum variety. Although foods like wild salmon and sardines contain a good amount of omega-3, it's hard to get a therapeutic dose through food alone. When choosing a supplement, look for dosages of at least 1 gram and up to 4 grams of purified fish or algae oil, with a higher percentage of EPA to DHA. It can take up to three weeks to see results.

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MELATONIN can be taken as a supplement to reduce inflammation and promote circadian rhythm. While there is little research on the efficacy of melatonin among SAD sufferers, one small 4-year study published in 2016 concluded that circadian misalignment is a major component of SAD and suggested that a low dose of slow release melatonin could help with treatment and prevention.

The impact of SAD is significant in North America. The Canadian Mental Health Association tells us that 2–3% of Canadians are diagnosed with it at some point in their lifetime, and that 10% of depression cases are caused by SAD. According to the Mayo Clinic, more than 3 million people per year in the US experience SAD. Many treatable factors can contribute to depression, including thyroid issues, food sensitivities, and other nutritional deficits, so if you think SAD might apply to you, talk to your health care provider and turn that SAD state of affairs into better weather!

For further reading visit ecoparent.ca/extras/WIN19