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Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Around this time of year, I begin to feel like I'm not getting enough sleep at night. I wake up in the mornings feeling fatigued, in a fog, like I am just going through the motions. Then a few months later when spring rolls back around, I begin to feel better. Is this just the "winter blues" or something more serious?

During the colder months of fall and winter, when we experience less exposure to sunlight, some people suffer from the symptoms mentioned above that can appear gradually or come on all at once. These symptoms often dissipate as spring arrives and stay in remission through the spring and summer months. Those who work long hours inside office buildings with few windows may experience symptoms all year, and some individuals may note changes in mood during long stretches of cloudy weather. This may be a sign of seasonal affective disorder (SAD).

Seasonal affective disorder has been linked to a biochemical imbalance in the brain prompted by shorter daylight hours and a lack of sunlight during the winter. Just as sunlight affects the seasonal activities of animals, SAD may be an effect of this seasonal light variation in humans. As seasons change, people experience a shift in their biological internal clock or circadian rhythm that can cause them to be out of step with their daily schedule. Melatonin, a sleep-related hormone, also has been associated to SAD. This hormone, which has been linked to depression, is produced at increased levels in the dark. When the days are shorter and darker, more melatonin is produced. Researchers have proved that bright light makes a difference in the brain chemistry, although the exact means by which sufferers are affected is not yet known. SAD may begin at any age, but the main age of onset is between 18 and 30 years. And, according to the American Academy of Family Physicians, six in one hundred Americans suffer from seasonal affective disorder. Some studies show that SAD is diagnosed more often in women than in men, but that men may have more-severe symptoms.

SAD symptoms can include, but are not limited to, fatigue, lack of interest in normal activities, social withdrawal, craving foods high in carbohydrates, weight gain or weight loss, difficulty concentrating and processing information, depression and anxiety.

There are some actions you can take on your own that may help, such as: **making your environment sunnier and brighter.** Open blinds and curtains and trim tree branches that block sunlight. Sit closer to bright windows while at home or in the office. **Get outside.** Take a long walk, eat lunch at a nearby park, or simply sit on a bench and soak up the sun. Even on cold or cloudy days, outdoor light can help — especially if you spend some time outside within two hours of getting up in the morning. **Exercise regularly.** Physical exercise helps relieve stress and anxiety, both of which can increase seasonal affective disorder symptoms. Being more fit can make you feel better about yourself, too, which can lift your mood.

If you feel you are suffering from seasonal affective disorder, it is important to seek the help of a trained medical or mental health professional for a proper diagnosis. SAD can sometimes be misdiagnosed as hypothyroidism, hypoglycemia, infectious mononucleosis, or confused with a more serious condition like severe depression or bipolar disorder.

If you would like to talk with someone about how you are feeling, you can call **COMCARE of Sedgwick County, a licensed Community Mental Health Center, at 316-660-7540.** COMCARE will speak with you confidentially and assist you with your next step.