

Seasonal Affective Disorder

How to Beat It!

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that occurs seasonally. It is triggered by the change in seasons and usually occurs during winter, possibly due to the lack of sunlight. This condition affects more than 500,000 individuals annually and peaks around the same time each year. For the most part, symptoms of seasonal affective disorder, which often include chronic fatigue, depression, and other psychological disturbances, begin in the fall and continue throughout the winter months. (This condition may also occur during the spring or early summer, but these cases are far less common.) Here are some ways to *beat* SAD before it *beats* you!

BE A CHILD OF THE LIGHT

One of the best ways to combat SAD is by **increasing the amount of light you get**, both natural and artificial. Try these suggestions:

- ✚ First thing in the morning, when the alarm goes off, **don't hit the snooze button!** Delaying your getting out of bed in favor of an extra few minutes of "rest" doesn't help you, in fact, it sets a pattern for lethargy and haze for the rest of the day.
- ✚ When you waken, spring out of bed as best as you can, and **open all the blinds in the house and turn on all the lights.** This helps "seal in" the sleep you get and opens your system to alertness and activity.
- ✚ **Get a Happy Lamp.** Sometimes called *light boxes* or *sun lamps*, these are sources of *simulated natural sunlight* that folks in the North have known about for a long time. Without UV rays, they can really boost your spirit whether you use them in the morning (best) or throughout the day. Some are shaped like [boxes](#), others as [lamps](#). They stimulate circadian rhythms and are very helpful for many people. (The words *boxes* and *lamps*, above, in blue, are links to Amazon.com for such aids.) Some people have negative reactions to these, so best check with your doctor before you buy one.
- ✚ **Take a morning walk.** Walking a pet, or a spouse before you go to work or school will help accomplish the same result: energizing you for a day of activity instead of lethargy.

CAFFEINE CAN BE YOUR FRIEND

In carefully administered and moderate doses, a cup of **coffee or black tea** in the morning and/or during the day can help *chase the blues away*. A bottle/can of **Coca Cola** can do the same thing. But remember that caffeine has a half-life: it continues to stay in your system many hours after it's ingested. Best cut yourself off by three in the afternoon if you want to . . .

GET A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

Sleep deprivation is in the top three things that lead to anxiety and seasonal depression during winter months. Melatonin, a chemical that the body produces that enables sleep, is produced more in winter months than in summer. By being a *Child of the Light* and through moderate use of *Caffeine*, you can delay the Melatonin-producing mechanism in the brain until bedtime. Then, when you go to bed, you'll be set up for the kind of deep sleep you want and need. Another strategy that slows down the production of Melatonin is . . .

REDUCING YOUR CARBOHYDRATE INTAKE

Carbs are *Melatonin food*, if you will. By **decreasing [carb-heavy foods](#)**, you can empower the circadian rhythm God put in your system to work for you instead of against you! And lest you forget, alcohol (beer and drinks) are laden with carbs. As holiday parties increase, **make sure your blood alcohol level doesn't rise** with them. [It may seem like alcohol is a stimulant; it is not!](#) It is a depressant. But so many uninformed people try to self-medicate happiness by adding booze. A recipe for failure, to be sure.

STICK TO A ROUTINE

Getting on a schedule—sticking to the same routine day in and day out—may seem laborious and perhaps a little monotonous, but it's great for combatting depression! Arise-time, bed-time, meal-time, exercise-time, etc. will all work for you if you can do them at about the same time each day. Sleeping in late on weekends may seem attractive, but it contributes to SAD. **And especially during the holidays when school and work take a little time off**, be very careful not to get lazy about your routine. Remember that *what's attractive* isn't always the best thing for you! A little discipline here goes a long way in the SAD war!

EMPLOY AN ADVENTUROUS CHANGE OF VENUE

Ice skating, viewing Christmas lights (even those that go up before Halloween!), and going to concerts and other events are beneficial for two primary reasons: **they're things that you don't do everyday that can help with the winter boredom, and they all involve a change of location**. Little [social extras, especially when they involve changes of venues](#), are great ammunition in the battle against SAD. Even if it's just a walk down the hall at work or a jog around a building at college, changing your location for a few minutes every hour or two can make you more alert, more productive, and more fun to be around. Little things make a big difference. Don't dishearten if you can't go to Cozumel for a week: find a little retreat with someone you like right where you are!

YOU KNEW THIS WAS COMING: INCREASE EXERCISE

For many of the reasons stated above, as well as reasons based on good neuroscience, **getting as much or more energy in winter months than you do in the summer** is paramount to mental health. Whether in the gym or on a bike, inside or out, a little aerobic exercise serves the winter body well. Suffice it to say that there are things that go on in your body during exercise that enhance the chemical composition of your brain. *Five million neuroscientists can't be wrong!*

THINK IGLOO INSTEAD OF SAUNA

It's natural to want to crank up the heat during the winter months. But many researchers agree that **too much heat in the home or in the office** decreases humidity, zaps moisture from the air and your skin, throat, eyes, and nasal passages, and leave you prone to colds, flu, and sinus infections. If you like it warm inside, **use a humidifier** to add moisture back into the environment.

Finally, an exhaustive search of the Internet will give you tons of ways to vary the variations on the themes I've suggested above. But by simply following some of this advice, you can avoid much of the *Winter Blues* and give yourself a great present this Christmas: a better-feeling you for your friends, your family, your co-workers, and yourself to enjoy!

Happy Winter . . . Fr. Bob Bosworth†