

Change in season also causes changes in mood

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SEASONAL CHANGES

I have always said when talking with people about the changing seasons that they "do a body good". My belief is that your body "needs" these transitions for balance. To create a kind of normalcy to our lives. We need the rejuvenation of spring, the light hearted, relaxing days of summer, the caloric buildup and lowering temperature changes of fall, and yes, the lathargicness of winter. I have always believed that. That is, until about a week ago. I was discussing the upcoming approach of fall and winter with some friends and doing my predictable "seasonal" repartee when someone brought up the downside . You know what I'm talking about, the winter blues, cabin fever, the "snow is dirty and I just want it to be spring" feeling. So I got to thinking, it has been around 7+ years since I went through an entire winter. Had I forgotten what it was like? Had I fallen into that fantasy world of believing it all was just a winter wonderland encased in a snow globe? So I started to look into this "downside" and was amazed to find out the following.

SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER (SAD)

As if there aren't enough afflictions and diagnosable disorders in the world, Walla, here's another one. I had never heard of SAD. If you asked me what the acronym stood for I would have come up with possibilities ad infinitum. However, this acronym and its definition caught me by surprise. It is identified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Forth Edition (DSM-IV) as a cyclical type of depression believed to be brought on by insufficient light. As the days shorten and become cloudier during the fall and winter seasons many people experience an increase in symptoms associated with this disorder. The causes are still partly a mystery, but it is known that the nerve centers in our brain controlling our daily rhythms and moods are stimulated by the amount of light entering the eyes. During the night glands produce a substance called *melatonin* (the same chemical that is in turkey), *which* makes us drowsy. At daybreak the bright light causes the glands to stop producing this melatonin. But on dull winter days, especially indoors, not enough light is received to trigger this waking up process. More recently good evidence has been found to link exposure to bright light with the increased production of a substance called *Serotonin*. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter, i.e. it carries signals from the output of one nerve to the input of the next inside the brain. Lack of serotonin is known to be a cause of depression, and indeed this maps well onto what people say: tasks that are easy when you are well, become frustratingly difficult

when you are depressed. Some symptoms identified with SAD are depression with fall or winter onset, a lack of energy, decreased interest in work or significant activities, increased appetite with weight gain, carbohydrate cravings, increased sleep, excessive daytime sleepiness, afternoon slumps accompanied by decreased energy and concentration, and social withdrawal.

WHAT TO DO?

If you asked me if I ever exhibited any of these symptoms I would probably say, "Yea, everyday! What else is new?" However, this is serious business. Why? I firmly believe that the more we find out about why we do the things we do, the healthier we become. I never was one to believe that "ignorance is bliss". I want to be happy AND educated about myself. So what do we do about SAD? Since SAD is associated with diminished light, surround yourself with bright white light for between ½ to ¾ hours per day should be sufficient. The light must be suitably bright. At least 2500lux (lux is the technical measure of brightness) is needed, which is 5 times brighter than a well-lit office (a normal living room might be as low as 100lux); brighter lights up to 10,000lux work quicker. The lights must deliver the lux at a sensible distance, so you don't have to be sat too close to it. Contrary to the old belief the light does not need to be special daylight, color matching or 'full spectrum' light; simply changing the lamps in a room to these special types will not produce sufficient light. Daily exercise has been shown to be helpful, particularly when done outdoors. Even if done on a cloudy day it is better than no light. For those who tend to crave sweets during the winter, eating a balanced diet may help one's mood.

For now, know that this does exist. Since I believe in a holistic triad approach to life, it is only wise to recognize what may be going on with our bodies and to seek out help in all areas. This includes not only the physical, but the mental and spiritual sides as well. SAD is a form of Depression. If you, or someone you know may exhibit some or all of these symptoms it may be beneficial to consult a professional for a proper diagnosis and treatment. There are also more than enough sites on the Internet that deal exclusively with SAD or have links to sites that do.