

Is what I'm experiencing normal or do I have Seasonal Affective Disorder?

You may have noticed that you would like to sleep a bit more lately or that your eating habits have changed slightly now that the days are shorter and the weather is cooler. Does this mean you have Seasonal Affective Disorder? Chances are, probably not. Researchers in Boston (Harmatz et al, 1999) conducted a study with over 300 people who rated feelings of depression each season over the course of a year. The results showed that feelings of depression were highest in the winter and lowest in the summer (this was also found with feelings of hostility, anger, irritability, and anxiety!). What causes these changes? The researchers in this study suggest that diet, activity, and light exposure all show seasonal variation and might, either singly or in combination, contribute to the seasonal differences of these feelings.

Although these differences in mood seem to be common, our society, unfortunately, does not encourage being less productive or less active during the winter months. This may lead some people who are naturally feeling less active or more moody to feel guilty and more depressed because they are not as happy as they "should" be by society's standards. (It is these feelings of inadequacy that may lead to a more serious form of depression.)

While some variation in mood and activity level is normal, some people do experience differences that are a form of a depressive disorder. A seasonal pattern to depression (or mania) is called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). The winter version of SAD affects up to half a million people each year in the United States. Symptoms of SAD include feeling down for most of the day, feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness, loss of energy, withdrawing from friends, oversleeping, losing interest in activities you previously enjoyed, significant weight gain, feelings of inappropriate guilt, and difficulty concentrating. A major marker for determining whether the winter blues you're experiencing is normal or more serious is to look at how impairing these feelings are for you. Are you feeling so down that you're missing days of work or school? Have your relationships suffered? Have you found it much more difficult to do daily tasks like cooking or other tasks of caring for yourself or your children? If the answer to any of these questions is "yes," you may find talking to a mental health professional very helpful. In addition, anyone experiencing a form of winter blues may find the following tips helpful in improving your mood:

1. Let there be light. Make your home sunnier and brighter. Open blinds, add skylights, and trim tree branches that block sunlight.

2. Get out. Get outdoors on sunny days, even during winter. Take a long walk, eat lunch at a nearby park, or simply sit peacefully on a bench and soak up the sun.

3. Exercise regularly. Physical exercise helps relieve stress and anxiety, both of which can increase SAD symptoms. Being more fit can make you feel better about yourself, too, which can lift your mood.

5. Take care of yourself. Get enough rest, eat a balanced diet, and take time to relax! Don't turn to alcohol or unprescribed drugs for relief. If your body is asking for a couple extra hours of sleep, give yourself permission to take that time.

6. Practice stress management. Learn how to better manage stress. Unmanaged stress can lead to depression, overeating, or other unhealthy thoughts and behaviors.

7. Socialize. Stay connected with people you enjoy being around. They can offer support, a shoulder to cry on or a joke to give you a little boost.

8. Take a trip. If possible, take a winter vacation in a sunny, warm location.