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newsletter



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Shedding Some Light on Seasonal Affective Disorder

Most people feel it, the early sunsets and the extended darkness.

According to the Mood Disorders Society of Canada, 15% of us experience the winter blues, a result of shortened exposure to daylight. The symptoms include weight gain, cravings for carbohydrates and a general sense of lethargy.

In northern climates, a large number of people suffer from something more severe than the winter blues—seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, an affliction that is similar in many ways to depression. Studies have shown seasonal affective disorder to be up to eight times more common in women.

There are competing theories to its cause, but the prevailing thought is that seasonal affective disorder is linked to the body's internal 24-hour clock, the circadian rhythm. Nerve centres in the brain impact mood, and are stimulated by light entering through the eyes. At night and in periods of reduced light, a gland in the brain produces melatonin, a hormone that induces drowsiness.

Other research links seasonal affective disorder with serotonin, a neurotransmitter that helps to regulate mood and behaviour and is stimulated by sunlight. Shorter days in the cold seasons are thought to decrease serotonin levels.

Symptoms are similar to those of depression, bipolar disorder and even thyroid conditions, which makes seasonal affective disorder difficult to diagnose. Experiencing its effects over two consecutive winters without explanation for mood change is an indication of its presence.

Sufferers often withdraw from friends and family and have decreased interest in activities they usually enjoy. Other indicators include:

- Weight gain/cravings for sweet or starchy foods,
- Fatigue and tendency to oversleep,
- Difficulty concentrating,
- Irritability and fits of crying,
- Feelings of anxiety and despair,
- Avoidance of social situations, and
- Decreased sex drive.

The symptoms usually abate in spring with the brighter days.


There is encouraging news around treatment for seasonal affective disorder. Recent reports in *The Globe and Mail* and *The New York Times* heralded light therapy as a means of countering the impact of reduced sunlight.

A study by psychiatrists at the University of British Columbia and University of Toronto found that a box emitting light at 10,000 lux was as effective as fluoxetine (Prozac) at improving symptoms in 70% of patients.

Under the supervision of professionals, seasonal affective disorder sufferers sit in front of a light box for a prescribed period of time, two to three times daily in some cases. Treatment starts as days shorten and continues through early spring.

Dawn simulation, a variation on light therapy, was found in a different study to be even more effective at treating seasonal affective disorder. Using this treatment, patients are exposed to gradually increasing brightness beginning at five o'clock in the morning while they sleep.

Antidepressant medications can be effective in relieving symptoms for those severely affected by seasonal affective disorder. Short-term counselling, such as cognitive-behavioural therapy, can also be helpful.

Sufferers are also encouraged to get regular exercise to relieve stress, build energy and raise spirits. Vacationing in a sunny destination can temporarily relieve symptoms, but they typically recur after return from holiday. For people who think they might be experiencing seasonal affective disorder, the right place to seek treatment is with their family doctor. Employees may also have a range of services available to them through their employee assistance program (EAP), including one-on-one counselling and programs aimed at promoting good physical and mental health. 

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ALSO: IS SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER IMPACTING YOUR WORKPLACE? by Christine Potvin

Is Seasonal Affective Disorder Impacting Your Workplace?

How prevalent is Seasonal Affective Disorder in Canada?

It is estimated that millions of Canadians endure what is known as the “winter blues,” and that 2% to 3% of the population has symptoms severe enough to be diagnosed with seasonal affective disorder (SAD).¹

Although research is in its early stages, seasonal affective disorder appears to be related to decreased exposure to sunlight in the colder seasons. Because we are a northern country and the days are much shorter in winter, it is a concern for Canadians. A much smaller group of people experiences seasonal affective disorder in the summer months. Both types share some symptoms and differ in others.

Seasonal affective disorder usually affects people in their twenties and thirties, increases in prevalence until the mid-fifties and then tends to disappear.

What impact does seasonal affective disorder have in the workplace?

We can't say for certain. Often, people experiencing seasonal affective disorder will also present tendencies toward another mental disorder. It is important to note that seasonal affective disorder is not recognized by psychiatric professionals as a distinct disorder; it is diagnosed as a type of depression.

Studies have shown workplace mental illness to cost the Canadian economy \$33 billion annually.² Although these numbers are staggering and seasonal affective disorder undoubtedly accounts for a portion, it is impossible to say exactly how big of a part.

What signs should we look for in employees experiencing seasonal affective disorder?

Because seasonal affective disorder is a type of depression, the symptoms are similar and so is the impact on employee performance. Things to watch out for include increased absenteeism and presenteeism, irritability, trouble concentrating and disengagement from other employees.



BY

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How can an employee assistance program help?

A good employee assistance program (EAP) will provide services tailored to the needs of people experiencing seasonal affective disorder. Through their offerings, employees have access to professional counsellors who work with other healthcare professionals to ensure sufferers receive the support they need.

Where it is deemed the appropriate type of treatment, counsellors can offer emotional support and work one-on-one with employees to help them develop strategies to manage their symptoms and improve their overall quality of life.

How can managers help employees experiencing seasonal affective disorder?

Managers can help by educating themselves about the signs of seasonal affective disorder and other mental illnesses

present in their workplace. Managers and human resources professionals need to know what to look for in employees.

The WarrenShepell Research Group identifies a list of behaviours that indicate when an employee is depressed, including declining productivity and an increase in accidents and mistakes.³ Individuals showing symptoms should be encouraged to visit their doctor and in some cases, be referred to their EAP for assessment.

It is not an easy task for managers who may feel unqualified to intervene. But a good management assistance program will provide access to counselling and information they may be looking for. Managers also have access to telephone orientation services delivered by professional counsellors that can help when dealing with employees experiencing seasonal affective disorder.

Employers can also play a role by promoting healthy lifestyles among their employees. In addition to short-term counselling, a full-spectrum EAP will offer health information services, nutrition support and other resources to help people better understand and manage their symptoms. 🍁

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