

Changing clocks may signal depression for some

Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD is a disorder that affects one's mood according to the seasons and causes depression.

In most cases, symptoms appear during late fall or early winter and go away during the sunnier days of spring and summer. However, some people experience symptoms that begin in spring or summer. These are usually more severe, and suicide rates are known to increase during spring. In either case, symptoms may start out mild and become more severe as the season progresses.

SAD is diagnosed more often in women than in men, but men may have more severe symptoms. Bill, who works at NAMI DuPage, has SAD but has learned to manage it successfully.

He agreed to write the following about his experiences.

"Every holiday season I found myself becoming irritable, moody and depressed. It was paradoxical

because I looked forward to spending time with friends and family but at the same time dreaded the short days, falling leaves and general gray atmosphere. I was sleeping more, and going into work while living in a fog was daunting.

"After seeing a holiday picture of myself looking glum and aloof, I decided to seek the advice of my physician. He prescribed a low dose anti-depressant, which helped me through the long days of winter.

"But I wanted to take more control of this disorder so that I could embrace the season and not solely rely on medication. I discovered that exercising in a brightly lit gym helps a lot with my mood. I also try to eat sensibly and joined a nutrition support group.

"As a coping mechanism I also started to note the daily sunset times



Angela Adkins
On mental health

in mid-December until March as each day starts to bring a minute or two of more daylight. The anticipation of the coming spring and brighter days ahead helps me thrive even during the dormant season.

"SAD is very real and can affect anyone. Fortunately there are many ways to overcome it"

Common symptoms include a decrease of energy, a decrease in appetite or increase in cravings for sweet or starchy foods leading to weight gain, general heaviness of limbs, a feeling of increased fatigue leading to a tendency to oversleep, feelings of irritability, difficulty concentrating and an avoidance of social gatherings.

Don't brush it off as a seasonal funk that you have to tough out on your own, especially if you notice changes in thought patterns, find yourself

turning to alcohol more often or feel down for days at a time without any motivation for activities you usually enjoy. You can see your family doctor or a mental health provider.

Treatment may include light or photo therapy to mimic natural outdoor light. This can either be a special light box or a light visor that you wear on your head like a cap. Typically you will use this for 30 minutes each day until the seasons change and there is enough light to lift the depression. A mild anti-depressant may also be prescribed as it was for Bill.

NAMI DuPage has specially trained peer specialists who conduct drop-in, one-on-one mentoring sessions and are a valuable resource locally. Regular exercise, taking walks and managing stress also go a long way in alleviating symptoms.

— Angela Adkins is executive director of NAMI DuPage.

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