

The Seasons Are A'changin'

by Clare Carr, LPC, CAC II

As the days shorten and the nights lengthen, some of us experience what is called "seasonal affective disorder," or SAD. This is really just a fancy name for the "winter blues." The experience of SAD may be characterized by:

- Loss of interest in otherwise enjoyable activities
- Loss of appetite or overeating
- Weight loss or gain
- Insomnia or oversleeping
- Anxiety
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Agitation and irritability

In rare cases, people may experience an elevation in mood - a "reverse SAD" in which they experience a persistently elevated mood, hyperactivity and unbridled enthusiasm, disproportionate to the situation.

What causes SAD? It's linked to genetics, age and the body's natural chemical make-up. More specifically:

- Your circadian rhythm, or sleep clock, gets interrupted as the light/darkness of the season changes.
- Your body produces more melatonin than is needed during the long nights of winter.
- Your natural brain chemistry, specifically mood-related serotonin, drops with the lack of sunlight, thus leading to depression.

The situation may become serious. Some people may feel suicidal in thoughts or behavior. They may withdraw from social supports, have problems at work or school, and might even turn to alcohol or drugs to cope.

Fortunately, there are ways to deal with SAD. Here are some options:

- **Light Therapy:** Because the symptoms sometimes improve with more sunlight, a light box may be a viable solution. However, the FDA has not officially approved this treatment. Talk to your doctor if you think it might help you.
- **Medication:** If symptoms are severe, antidepressants may serve you well.
- **Psychotherapy:** Although SAD is caused by a chemical change in the brain, psychotherapy could help you identify negative thought patterns and behaviors. A trained therapist can assist you in learning better coping skills.

Other coping suggestions:

- Get out of doors on sunny days. Walk and relax in the sun whenever possible. Soak up the sun, but don't forget the sunscreen.
- Exercise regularly to reduce stress and anxiety.
- Take care of yourself with a balanced diet, sleep and relaxation.
- Socialize - Stay connected to good friends, make plans with someone on a frequent basis. Laugh and enjoy a good movie or joke.
- Take a trip - This is a great idea, especially if you can afford to head to sunnier places each winter.

For a more information, visit <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/seasonal-affective-disorder/DS00195>.

Clare Carr has spent over 25 years caring for people through her work as a therapist and as Spiritual Director for churches in Denver and Colorado Springs. Using cognitive-behavioral therapy and EMDR, she works with individuals in the areas of decision-making, trauma and recovery.