Canadian Mental Health Association
Champlain East

Association canadienne pour la santé mentale
Champlain Est

329 rue Pitt Street
Cornwall, On K6J 3R1
Tel 613-933-5845
1-800-493-8271
Fax 613-936-2323
chma-east.on.ca
acsm-est.on.ca

Understanding Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD):

More Than Just the Winter Blues

Submitted by Jennifer Meyer, Mental Health Promoter, CMHA Champlain East

As the days grow shorter and temperatures drop, many people notice changes in their mood and energy levels. For some, these changes go beyond feeling a little down and become a form of depression known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

SAD is a type of depression that follows a seasonal pattern. Most commonly, symptoms begin in late fall or early winter and improve during the spring and summer months. This is known as winter-pattern SAD. A less common form, called summer-pattern SAD, occurs during the warmer months.

People with SAD may experience many of the same symptoms as other forms of depression, including persistent sadness, anxiety, hopelessness, irritability, fatigue, loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed, and difficulty concentrating. Those with winter-pattern SAD often experience additional symptoms such as oversleeping, increased appetite, cravings for carbohydrates, weight gain, and social withdrawal. Many describe a tendency to "hibernate" during the winter months.

It is important to understand that SAD is different from the "holiday blues." While holiday stress, busy schedules, and family obligations can affect mood, SAD is linked to seasonal changes in daylight rather than calendar events.

Researchers believe reduced exposure to sunlight plays an important role in SAD. Lower levels of sunlight may affect the brain's production of serotonin, a chemical involved in regulating mood. Shorter daylight hours may also influence melatonin, a hormone that helps regulate sleep patterns. In some cases, lower vitamin D levels during winter may further contribute to symptoms.

SAD can affect anyone, and all ages, but some people are at greater risk. Women are diagnosed more often than men, and people living in northern regions with shorter winter daylight hours may be more susceptible. A family history of SAD or other forms of depression can increase the likelihood of developing the condition.

In Canada, approximately 2% to 3% of people will experience SAD during their lifetime, while another 15% may experience a milder seasonal mood change that does not significantly disrupt daily functioning.

If you notice seasonal changes in your mood, energy, sleep, or appetite that return year after year, it is important to speak with a healthcare professional. Because other medical conditions, such as thyroid disorders or other forms of depression, can cause similar symptoms, self-diagnosis is not recommended.

Several effective treatments are available. Light therapy, which involves daily exposure to a specialized light box, helps many people and can significantly reduce symptoms when used under

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medical guidance. Medication may also be appropriate for some individuals. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has been shown to help people identify and change negative thought patterns associated with depression.

In addition, healthy lifestyle habits can make a meaningful difference. Regular physical activity, spending time outdoors, maintaining a healthy diet, practicing good sleep habits, managing stress, and staying socially connected can all help improve mood and resilience.

At CMHA Champlain East, our goal is to provide education that encourages people to become more curious about and engaged with their mental health, as well as the mental health of their friends, family members, and community. Through education and awareness, we can help reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness and increase the likelihood that those who need support will reach out to appropriate resources and services.

For more information, contact Jenny, Mental Health Promoter, at 613-551-2490 or email meyerj@cmha-east.on.ca

DO YOU NEED HELP?

Dial or text 2-1-1 for free and confidential service that easily connects people to the critical social and community supports they need.

If you are thinking of suicide, please call 9-8-8 which is a mental health crisis and suicide prevention line.

The information provided is not a substitute for professional advice. If you need advice, please consult a qualified health care professional. For further information or if you want to access our services at CMHA, please call 1-800-493-8271 or visit our web site at www.cmha-east.on.ca