Coping with seasonal affective disorder

Many students are more sluggish in winter than in summer, but for those affected with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), the problem goes beyond occasional melancholy. Sufferers are depressed, lack motivation, and often feel tired throughout the day. The impact can mean excessive time in bed or in front of the TV, neglect of school or usual activities, and little to no social contact.

Seasonal Affective Disorder can be difficult to live with, but there are many treatment options available.

Light therapy. Because SAD results from a lack of light, one of the most effective treatments is phototherapy. This treatment exposes your body to very bright artificial light for extended periods of time. This generally means lying in front of a specially designed fluorescent "light box" between 20 minutes and two hours a day, usually right after waking up. Phototherapy can be performed at home or in a clinic.

Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT). This type of therapy works by trying to discover the negative feelings and beliefs that cause depression, and then replacing them with more positive thoughts. CBT can be used in conjunction with phototherapy, and according to some research, is the most effective way of treating the disorder.

Antidepressants. In cases of moderate to severe SAD, or when other forms of therapy are not effective, doctors will sometimes prescribe antidepressant medication. However, this form of treatment comes with side effects that can range from insomnia to decreased sex drive.

St. John's Wort. This herbal medicine is a natural alternative for relieving symptoms of mild depression. It may cause side effects, including nausea and headaches. Consult a physician before taking St. John's Wort as problems can arise if mixed with other medications or SAD therapies.

Winter mood boosters

If you suffer from SAD or the milder symptoms of the "winter blues," there are also several simple steps you can take every day to brighten up both body and mind.

Exercise. Regular exercise not only helps lift the negative feelings commonly experienced by SAD sufferers, it also prevents the weight gain associated with the illness. This doesn’t have to mean running a triathlon. A twenty-minute walk or jog every day can help a sufferer feel better.

Sunshine. Getting as much sun as possible during the winter months can help reduce the feelings of depression. Make sure blinds are open during the day, with a direct path to where you sit. Best of all—get outside in the sunshine whenever possible.

Regulate your body clock. In the old days people were awake when the sun was out, and in bed when it got dark. Today, our lives are inundated with artificial light, making it difficult for the body clock to do its job. By turning the lights down—or off—at night, you'll help control the circadian rhythms that naturally govern mood.

Watch what you eat. If you've got SAD, chances are you've developed a craving for pasta or pancakes. But one of the best things you can do is stick to nutritious, balanced meals.

Cut down on alcohol and caffeine. Caffeinated and alcoholic beverages disrupt your body's internal clock, resulting in a worsening of SAD symptoms. Try cutting down, or even cutting out, daily intake of these drinks.

It can't be sunny all the time, but that shouldn't keep students from enjoying the things they love to do in the winter months. If you think you, or someone you know is suffering from the "winter blues," or from SAD, contact a qualified professional for help, support, and advice.