

## Chapter 1

# Opening Up the Curtains on SAD

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Deciphering more info about SAD
  - ▶ Figuring out if you have SAD
  - ▶ Seeking solutions for SAD
  - ▶ Trying to prevent recurrences of SAD
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**p**eople with seasonal affective disorder (SAD) dread the turn from fall to winter. Darkness on the outside brings depression on the inside. People with SAD don't look forward to cozy nights in front of a roaring fire, skiing, making snowmen, or celebrating holidays. Instead, they simply hope and pray that they can muddle through until spring.

Most scientists believe that the primary cause of SAD is diminished sunlight that accompanies the shorter days in the winter. For many people, reduced light triggers changes that reverberate throughout their bodies and minds, causing their moods to darken (see Chapter 3 for a review of other causes of SAD).

In this chapter, we open the curtains on SAD, illuminating both the symptoms and treatments for SAD. With this insight in hand, you'll know if you suffer from SAD and how to overcome the misery if you have it.

## *Getting to Know SAD*

There's more to SAD than changing seasons. SAD is a real form of depression that can seriously impact a sufferer. Moods associated with SAD can be so dark that the person starts missing work, withdraws from people, and in rare cases, contemplates suicide.

SAD is more serious than bad moods related to cold weather or cloudy days. People with SAD usually report overwhelming feelings of fatigue, seriously depressed moods, cravings for carbohydrates, and disturbed sleep. These symptoms tend to endure through the winter months and improve in the spring.

How do you know if you have SAD? For starters, how do you feel about the seasons? Are you a summer or a winter person? We have a quiz for you.



Check off which of the following items apply to you:

- ☐ I like summer more than winter.
- ☐ I'm more active in the summer.
- ☐ I don't like the shorter days of winter as much as longer days in the summer.
- ☐ I don't like leaving work at 5:00 p.m. when it's already getting dark.
- ☐ I really enjoy the feeling of the first warm days of spring.
- ☐ I spend more time outside in the summer.
- ☐ I tend to gain a couple of pounds in the winter.

Did you answer yes to many if not all of the items? Guess what? If you did, that's pretty darn normal. *Most* people express a little preference for the summer and its longer days. And *most* people are a little more active in the summer than the winter.

The point we're trying to make is that a mere preference for the summer versus the winter doesn't mean you have SAD. In fact, your favorite season may be fall with its cooling temperatures and colorful foliage, yet you suffer from SAD that hits you hard after the last leaf falls. SAD is a condition in which the sufferers experience a major deterioration in moods that seems to come and go with the seasons (winter is especially problematic for the vast majority of SAD sufferers). Typical symptoms include

- ✓ Deep sadness
- ✓ Fatigue, excessive sleep
- ✓ Feelings of regret
- ✓ Loss of energy
- ✓ Loss of motivation
- ✓ Sense of worthlessness
- ✓ Weight gain (more than just a couple of pounds)
- ✓ Withdrawal from people

If these signs sound like what you're experiencing, you may have SAD. Read Chapter 2 for more specific information about SAD symptoms and how they're similar to and different from other emotional problems.



While the symptoms of SAD are more intense during the colder, darker months, they can have an impact at other times of the year. A few people have a form of SAD that's more intense in the brighter, sunnier months. As with any mood disorder or emotional problem, the causes can be complex requiring varied approaches for relief and cure. If you suffer from SAD and have tried one or two therapies without positive results, don't give up! There's more than one way to bring the light back into your life. We share them with you throughout this book.

## *Finding Out What to Do about SAD*

We have good news for you. If you or someone you know has SAD, much can be done to alleviate the suffering. In fact, many good options for treating this condition exist today. At the same time, many of these options have been around a surprisingly long time (see the nearby sidebar “Ancient wisdom”).

In this book, we bring you information on the range of treatments that are likely to be helpful for SAD. These options include cognitive-behavior therapy that focuses on how to change both your thoughts and behavior in healthy ways. We also look at the biological factors behind SAD that affect your moods. Biologically focused treatments include light therapy, medication, diet, hormones, and supplements.

## *Using your mind to overcome SAD*

A highly effective way of alleviating SAD involves using the mind to re-establish good moods, increase energy, and instill hope. Again, the mind, body, and environment interact. When depressed people figure out how to think in non-depressed ways, their brains show improvements in functioning. See the sidebar “Changing thinking changes brains.”



In the 1950s, Dr. Aaron T. Beck developed the first therapy designed to help people with depression change how they think. Literally hundreds of studies since that time have shown that this therapy works very well for depression and a host of other emotional problems. Interestingly, no one applied this approach to the treatment of SAD for almost another 50 years. That neglect may have been due to the fact that most folks figured that because a lack of light was the major assumed cause of SAD, light would provide the major avenue to the alleviation of the problem.

## Ancient wisdom

Psychologist Steve Ilardi at the University of Kansas wondered why so many people suffer from depression. Almost a fourth of all Americans suffer from a type of depression at some point in their lives (including SAD, which most professionals consider to be a type of depression). Dr. Ilardi thought that the changes brought about by modern living may be responsible for the increase in dark moods. The fact that depression is more common in developed countries and in urban settings provided a clue.

He and his research team looked at factors that have changed over the centuries that may explain why so many people suffer. These factors include the following:

- ✓ People in ancient cultures, for the most part, got more exercise.
- ✓ They also got more exposure to light.
- ✓ They woke up when the sun came up and went to sleep when darkness fell.
- ✓ They lived in groups and didn't have a lot of time for whining, brooding, and complaining.
- ✓ Survival took up most of their time and attention; after all, it's not easy fighting off saber toothed tigers.

The Therapeutic Lifestyle Change program was developed based on these observations. The program encourages people with depression to get more exercise, light, and *omega-3 fatty acids* (an essential fatty acid that's been depleted from many modern diets). People in the program are also encouraged to become more socially connected and stop thinking about how bad things are for them. The treatment, although still in the very early stages of research, has been unusually successful in reducing depressive symptoms. Interestingly, *all* these suggestions (and more) can be found throughout this book.

All emotional disorders, including SAD, have multiple causes (see Chapter 3 for more about the causes of SAD), and they can be treated in various ways. So, finally research established that cognitive therapy worked well for the alleviation of SAD. Furthermore, willingness to stick with cognitive therapy may be greater than for light therapy, and cognitive therapy may do more to prevent relapse than lights.

See Chapters 9 and 10 for more information about how you can use cognitive therapy if you have SAD. And see the sidebar “When thoughts lead to SAD” for recent findings about how attitudes can make you vulnerable to SAD.

## *Tinkering with a SAD body*

Emotional problems don't exist just in your mind; they impact your body simultaneously. And vice versa! Your moods actually come about from an interaction of your thoughts, the environment, and your physiology. So, while changing your thinking about SAD is a significant component to getting better, physical changes can also help. One of the major approaches for treating SAD involves therapies

specifically aimed at influencing biological processes. The biological strategies include the following:

- ✓ **Alternatives:** The hormone melatonin is an especially promising possibility for re-regulating the biological clock that gets out of synch with SAD. Omega-3 oils, found in fish, seem to help in the treatment of SAD and other types of depression as well. However, some natural alternatives provide more hype than hope. See Chapter 8 for a full discussion of alternative biological approaches to the treatment of SAD.
- ✓ **Diet:** Changes in diet aren't usually considered a front-line treatment for SAD. However, people with SAD complain about carbohydrate cravings, weight gain, and energy loss. Changes in diet may help with all these problems. See Chapter 7 for more information about how to consider diet in your game plan for addressing SAD.
- ✓ **Light therapy:** This treatment was the first designed to target SAD specifically. Light therapy involves exposure to intensely bright lights for a period of 30 or more minutes each day. Most people with SAD can expect improvement with light therapy within a couple of weeks, sometimes even sooner. See Chapter 5 for the ins and outs of light therapy.
- ✓ **Medications:** Anti-depressant medications have helped millions of people overcome depression. They appear to be quite helpful in the treatment of SAD, too, although the research on their effectiveness is somewhat more limited for this application.

One medication, Wellbutrin, is the first to have received specific FDA approval for the treatment of SAD. Wellbutrin may target SAD symptoms more directly than other medications, and it's been used to prevent future recurrences of the disorder. Furthermore, Wellbutrin usually decreases appetite, thereby alleviating the weight gain that many people with SAD experience. See Chapter 6 for more information about medications for the treatment of SAD.



## Changing thinking changes brains

Depressed people have negative thoughts about themselves, the world, and the future. After successful treatment with antidepressant medication, depressive thinking usually subsides. Brains of depressed people look different before treatment and after treatment with antidepressant medication.

Cognitive therapy, which involves changing the way people think, has also been found to be highly effective in the treatment of depression.

A group of researchers wondered if the brains of people treated with cognitive therapy changed like the brains of people who'd been treated only with medication. So, researchers scanned the brains of a group of people before and after 15 to 20 sessions of cognitive therapy. For those people in the group that benefited from cognitive therapy, pre- and post-brain scans showed significant differences. Like antidepressant medication, cognitive therapy changes thinking and *also* changes the brain.

## *Making moves against SAD*

SAD makes you feel tired, unenthusiastic, and unmotivated. Those feelings lead to procrastination and isolation. Not getting things done leads to guilt and being alone leads to loneliness. Both increase SAD. It's a vicious cycle, and that's not good.

So, one way to treat SAD is with an increase in activity — and we mean a lot of activity — the more the better. Activities for alleviating SAD fall under two major categories:

- ✔ **Mastery:** These activities give you a sense of accomplishment. They're usually a little challenging. However, when you have SAD, you need to give yourself a little extra credit even for small tasks, such as washing the dishes, balancing your checkbook, or cleaning out a closet because even those tasks are more challenging than they would be without SAD in your life.
- ✔ **Pleasure:** These activities are for the sole purpose of experiencing enjoyment. Unfortunately, if you have a case of SAD, nothing looks like it can give you pleasure. But if you make yourself do a variety of these activities anyway, you're likely to find enjoyment seeping slowly back into your life. So consider going to a movie, taking a walk, or visiting friends.

We recommend that you take on a variety of activities from both the mastery and pleasure categories. And if you find things to do outside, that's even better because you get more exposure to light — sort of a double bonus play.



Whether you choose activities that give you a sense of accomplishment, pleasure, or both, we recommend that you start small. Don't take on things that feel outside of your reach. Just be consistent with your effort to participate and you'll get there.



Exercise is a special type of activity that can give you a sense of mastery, but quite possibly pleasure as well. The pleasure part usually comes after you've been engaging in exercise a while. Exercise releases endorphins — natural body chemicals that feel good. Exercise seems to work about as well for depression or SAD as medications, light, and thought therapy. When it comes to exercise, you have a lot of possibilities to choose from. See Chapter 15 for information about your exercise options as well as how to get yourself motivated to do it.

## *Knowing when to get help*

Self-help has been shown to work very well for depression, SAD, and many other emotional problems. You may find that reading this book and working

on what we suggest (such as light therapy, increased activities, and thinking differently) snaps you right back to feeling good again. But sometimes people need a little extra help.



The decision to seek help depends on a variety of issues. Making that decision certainly isn't a sign of weakness or laziness. It's a tough but brave decision to make.



Please seek professional help *immediately* if you have any of the following symptoms:

- ✓ Feeling as if there's nothing you can do to better your situation
- ✓ Feeling totally hopeless
- ✓ Feeling unable to perform your usual responsibilities
- ✓ Feelings of desperation
- ✓ Hearing voices
- ✓ Seeing things that aren't really there
- ✓ Serious weight loss
- ✓ Thoughts of ending your life
- ✓ Very weird, unusual thoughts



Even if you don't have serious symptoms like the ones above, you may simply prefer to get a little help. Just as you may hire a tutor for Spanish or a personal trainer for sticking with an exercise regimen, you may want a therapist to help guide you through the process of getting better. The different kinds of nonprofessional and professional help are covered in Chapter 4.

## Going from SAD to Glad

Our primary purpose in writing this book is to help you erase SAD from your life. And we give you ways of accomplishing that goal as well as prevent the reoccurrence of SAD in the future. But we can't resist trying to take you a little further.

If you get past your SAD, that's wonderful. Some people recover from SAD or other types of depression and feel great. But others are left feeling a little flat — not bad, not sad, but a little empty. It's like SAD consumed their spirit and energy. Winning the battle of SAD leaves them feeling a lack of purpose and meaning.

If this state of affairs applies to you, we have some thoughts to share. You won't find solid, lasting happiness by seeking momentary pleasures,



money, or the fountain of youth. On the other hand, you can discover sustainable peace and satisfaction from your life.

The path for getting there includes what we call the “Five F’s”:

- ✓ **Feeling grateful:** If you’re reading this book, that means you can read! Appreciate what you take for granted, like reading. Someone cared enough to send you to school and teach you to read. Your life no doubt has many other gifts that are all too easy to overlook. We recommend that you notice these endowments and allow yourself to savor them.
- ✓ **Finding forgiveness:** Anger and revenge aren’t good for your health or your spirit. When you forgive others who’ve wronged you, you give yourself the gift of peace and serenity.
- ✓ **Focusing on the present:** People make themselves miserable when they focus on anxieties and worries about the future as well as regrets and guilt from the past. Few present moments are all that bad so figure out how to focus on now.
- ✓ **Forging meaning through good works:** People report feeling that their lives are more meaningful when they donate to worthy causes, pitch in to help others, and contribute to the betterment of the planet. Make a decision to volunteer something of yourself to others. You’ll be glad you did.
- ✓ **Forming better connections:** Humans are social creatures. Research says that people with good social supports and relationships get sick less often and feel better emotionally.

See Chapters 18 and 19 for more information about all the above points.