

Health and Wellbeing Newsletter No. 3

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As the seasons change and we head into cooler days and darker evenings, it's time to start thinking about looking after ourselves to prevent illness spoiling our enjoyment of autumn colour and events. Inside you'll find the first part of some useful information on how the season can affect our moods, health and wellbeing, and some steps we can take and strategies we can adopt to ensure we all have a healthy, happy season...

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SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) is a type of winter depression that affects an estimated 7% of the UK population every winter between September and April, in particular during December, January and February.

It is caused by a biochemical imbalance in the hypothalamus due to the shortening of daylight hours and the lack of sunlight in winter.

For many people SAD is a seriously disabling illness, preventing them from functioning normally without continuous medical treatment.

For others, it is a mild but debilitating condition causing discomfort but not severe suffering. We call this subsyndromal SAD or 'winter blues.' It is estimated that a further 17% of the UK population have this milder form of condition.

The symptoms of SAD usually recur regularly each winter, starting between September and November and continuing until March or April.

A diagnosis can be made after three or more consecutive winters of symptoms, which may include a number of the following:

Depression

Sleep Problems

Lethargy

Over Eating

Cognitive Function e.g. Difficulty with concentration and memory

Social Problems e.g. Irritability, Finding it harder to be with people

Anxiety

Sudden Mood Changes in Spring

Treatment

Light therapy has been shown to be effective in up to 85 per cent of diagnosed cases. That is, exposure, for up to four hours per day (average 1-2 hours) to very bright light, at least ten times the intensity of ordinary domestic lighting.

Ordinary light bulbs and fittings are not strong enough. Average domestic or office lighting emits an intensity of 200-500 lux but the minimum dose necessary to treat SAD is 2500 lux, The intensity of a bright summer day can be 100,000 lux.

Light treatment should be used daily in winter (and dull periods in summer) starting in early autumn when the first symptoms appear. It consists of sitting two to three feet away from a specially designed light box, usually on a table, allowing the light to shine directly through the eyes.

The user can carry out normal activity such as reading, working, eating and knitting while stationary in front of the box. It is not necessary to stare at the light although it has been proved safe.

Treatment is usually effective within three or four days and the effect continues provided it is used every day. Tinted lenses, or any device that blocks the light to the retina of the eye, should not be worn.

Complementary Therapies

Psychotherapy, counselling or any complementary therapy which helps the sufferer to relax, accept their illness and cope with its limitations are extremely useful.

Further information can be found at www.SADA.org.uk, the Seasonal Affective Disorder Association website.

As always, consult a medical professional for advice and support if you, or someone you know, may be affected by the issues above.

BETTER COPING SKILLS

Psychologists have found that we can all learn how to improve our coping skills and be more resilient.

Ten ways to build the resilience to deal with whatever life throws at you.

1. Problem solve

Try problem-solving. Work out what you need to do now to get over what's happened to you.

Talk to people and think about taking practical steps, such as finding a support group. Sympathy feels good, and sometimes it's tempting to be a victim and tell people how bad your troubles are, but problem-solving will be more constructive in the long run.



2. Keep calm

Try to regulate your emotions, for example by staying calm, rather than reacting violently with tears, anger or fear. Learn how to keep yourself physically calm and you will be better equipped to cope.

- Keep your breathing relaxed and deep to help control anxiety. When we feel anxious, our breathing often becomes quick and shallow. Inhale through your nose and breathe deeply into and out of your belly (not your chest).
- Stay physically relaxed. Exercise, warm baths and stretching are good ways to reduce muscle tension.
- Maintain a positive attitude when times are tough by visualising or thinking about something relaxing. Take a few moments to imagine a favourite place, floating in the sea or lying in bed, and you'll switch into a calmer physical state.

3. Remember, it's your life

Don't feel that bad events or a dreadful childhood should lead to a life of problems. Many people survive troubled families. The majority of adult children of alcoholics do not repeat their parents' drinking patterns, and the same is true of adults who have survived families troubled by mental illness, chronic marital problems, racial discrimination and poverty.

Some children naturally rebound from knock-backs with their self-esteem intact. If you need help doing this now you're an adult, talking to a trusted friend, colleague or professional can help.



4. Be proud of surviving

Something bad happened, but you survived. Look back and try to find things about what you did or how you responded that you can be proud of. Find your strengths and build self-esteem from them.

5. Develop insight

What happened? How did it affect you? Why did other people behave the way they did? How do you feel about it? What other factors were part of what happened? People who ask themselves penetrating questions and give honest answers tend to bounce back more quickly.



6. Use humour

See the funny side and you'll cope with the situation better. Jokes have a way of making worries shrivel up and die. A good sense of humour is a great inner strength.



7. Be realistic, not dramatic

Another strategy which can help is to write down the worst possible result on one side of a piece of paper, and the best possible result on the other. The worst result of losing a job, for instance, might be, "I'll be unemployed for the rest of my life." The best might be, "My next job will make me a millionaire." It's common to focus on the worst possibility, but the best possibility may be equally likely.

End by writing down in the middle of the paper the real likely future: "I'll look for another job. It may take a while, but in the end I'll find something I'm happy with."

8. Get support

Resilient people tend to have strong family support systems and they seek and receive help from others when they need it (a teacher, a neighbour, the parents of peers or a spouse). Don't be ashamed to talk about your problems and get help.

9. Don't look for blame

Some people make the mistake of blaming themselves and thinking that whatever goes wrong is all their fault. They then feel guilty and worthless and give up on things.

Other people make the mistake of blaming everything that goes wrong on somebody else. This makes them feel out of control, angry and unable to take charge of their lives.

Resilient people don't blame themselves for everything that goes wrong. Or blame everyone else. They take responsibility for their own part in it.

If you're blaming yourself, ask "How did other people contribute to this problem?". When you're blaming others, think "How did I contribute to the problem?". This can help you see your situation more realistically.



10. Do something

Resilience grows by making something worthwhile out of painful times. Starting a support group to help others, or making something creative out of bad experiences, such as writing down what has happened, painting or singing can help you express yourself and get through hard times.