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SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER AS MENTAL HEALTH DISORDER

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Many people feel “down” or have the “winter blues” when the days get shorter in the fall and winter and feel much better in the spring when longer daylight hours return. Sometimes, these mood changes can affect all aspects of a person's life and might as well be a seasonal affective disorder.

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is one of the depression types that many people are not aware of. It's a real medical diagnosis, which is listed in International Classification of Diseases 11th Revision, refers to recurrent depressive disorders and is characterized by repeated episodes of illness. Commonly people experience its symptoms in the fall and winter, yet SAD might bring depression in the spring and summer, because there are winter-pattern SAD, also known as winter depression, and summer-pattern SAD, which is less common. SAD symptoms last 4-5 months out of the year and include symptoms associated with depression. These disorder is related to the changes in seasons and lack of sunlight, which disorganizes human's sleep-wake cycle by influencing the endocrine system.

In most cases, SAD begins in young adulthood and occurs much more often in women than in men. Therefore, SAD is more common in people living farther north with shorter daylight hours in the winter. Additionally, people with SAD tend to have other mental disorders, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, eating disorder, anxiety disorder, or panic disorder. SAD sometimes runs in families and may be more common in people who have relatives with other mental illnesses, such as depression or schizophrenia.

To be diagnosed with seasonal depression a person must have the symptoms of depression or the more specific symptoms of winter-pattern or summer-pattern SAD and have their depressive episodes occurring during specific seasons (winter or summer) for at least 2 consecutive years. Seasonal depression requires treatment as well as any other depression. Light therapy, antidepressant medication, vitamin D supplements and psychotherapy are considered to be the most effective methods.

However, despite the importance of this disorder, many people confuse it with simple sadness, caused by short days and cold winter, and do not pay the attention it deserves. This article aims to expand knowledge about seasonal affective disorder, to point on its signs, symptoms and ways of treatment.