

SAD: More Than a Case of the Winter Blahs

It's estimated that Seasonal Affective Disorder, SAD for short, affects 5-million to 8-million people a year in the United States particularly in the colder, winter months when days are shorter and nights are longer.

It is thought to be related to the lack of available sunlight leading to a deficiency of Vitamin D, which, in turn, disrupts a person's natural sleep cycle. The effect on your brain can cause a person to function differently or, potentially, not at all.

"People in the winter time, particularly in northern, far northern latitudes or far southern latitudes, farther away from the equator will tend to get kind of sluggish and maybe depressed, they start to have carbohydrate cravings, and it may be enough that it's really a significant problem for them," explains Dr. Scott Hamilton, a psychiatrist with OSF HealthCare Behavioral Health in Bloomington.

As a behavioral health psychiatrist, Dr. Hamilton works with people suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder. He says there's a difference between SAD and a case of the occasional winter blahs. If you find your mind and mood are impacting your relationships, ability to work, or social activities, it's something that needs to be addressed.

There are a number of treatment opportunities for Seasonal Affective Disorder. Dr. Hamilton says one of the most effective is bright light therapy.

"These have a UV shield, full spectrum light, 30 minutes in the morning is how most studies were done, and pretty good results," he said. Dr. Hamilton continued, "Pretty uniformly positive results in people that have wintertime depression, and people that don't have winter depression, they do sometimes still help, but they're not as likely to be helpful."

Dr. Hamilton says these light boxes are available online, often for less than \$50. He also says that simple behavior modification can help with SAD symptoms. He says eating well and exercise can have a tremendous effect on depression symptoms, but if a person is having a tough time functioning on a day-to-day basis, he or she might want to see a therapist for professional help.

"I think trying that and getting more exercise and doing some healthy things first does make sense," said Dr. Hamilton. "If they get to the point where they can't function or they get suicidal thoughts, things like that, then they ought to talk to somebody. Those would be the real red flags."

Learn more about Seasonal Affective Disorder [here](#). To connect with an OSF HealthCare Behavioral Health specialist, talk to your primary care physician for a referral. To for more information about OSF HealthCare Behavioral Health click [here](#).