

# A SAD Winter



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Has there ever been a more perfect acronym than the one used to describe **S**easonal **A**ffective **D**isorder? S.A.D. Three little letters that perfectly describe the overall feeling of malaise many of us have as the calendar slowly tries to shovel itself clear of winter.

I must admit to not knowing that there was a technical term for the 'Winter Blues' until just recently. In retrospect, I should have known. Usually taken for granted is the fact that Earth, and everything on it, is solar powered. It's only natural for humans to be less-than-happy during this time of year, when there is so little daylight and so much darkness.



A woman undergoes light therapy for her SAD.

According to the Mayo Clinic, seasonal affective disorder is defined as: "A type of depression that occurs at the same time every year. If you're like most people with seasonal affective disorder, your symptoms start in the fall and continue into the winter months, sapping your energy and making you feel

moody.” Wow! That sounds just like me...and almost everyone I’ve crossed paths with since New Year’s.

To be honest, I thought seasonal affective disorder was just the technical term for “The Winter Blues,” or “Cabin Fever.” Not so. By chalking up your crappy attitude to one of those two reasons, you may be hurting yourself in the long run. SAD is technically a form of depression, and as such, there are ways to combat this disorder. Treatment for SAD, “includes light therapy (phototherapy), psychotherapy and medications.”

SAD symptoms “appear during late fall or early winter and go away during the sunnier days of spring and summer. Symptoms start off mild and become more severe as the season progresses.” During a winter like we’ve just experienced, some people have been feeling the effects of SAD for over six months! Let’s take a look at the symptoms:



Sleep or shovel? Hmmm...

- Depression
- Hopelessness
- Anxiety
- Loss of Energy
- Social Withdrawal
- Over Sleeping
- Loss of Interest in Activities You Once Enjoyed
- Appetite Changes, Especially Craving Food High in Carbohydrates
- Weight Gain

## ▪ Difficulty Concentrating and Processing Information

Uh-oh. Looks like I am one of the people who have been feeling the effects of SAD for six months or more. However, I am not ashamed of this. I would wager that only the very best of us living in this area fail to show at least a few of these signs during the fall and winter months.

It is important to remember that SAD is a form of depression, so there can be complications beyond the usual symptoms. Substance abuse is one that manifests itself in this area of the country during the winter, along the coast and down through Cape Cod and the Islands. Coastal communities live in concert with the outdoors, and the oceans. During winter, our ability to interact with either one is lessened. I used to work on Cape Cod during the cold months; it is a totally different place during that time, depressing compared to summer on the Cape. If you think I'm generalizing or embellishing, there is this story from a few years ago.



When you're a kid, snow means snowball fights, not shoveling.

Doctors and scientists think the disorder could develop during adolescence and early childhood, and to that I offer my totally unqualified disagreement. Winter when I was younger simply meant that I might consider heeding the words of my mother by putting a jacket on before I went outside to play. It's tough to be sad when you wake up knowing your day will consist of playing outside, throwing snowballs and sledding

until you get too cold, which will be remedied by going inside to warm up with some hot chocolate before going back out to do it all again. It's tough to be depressed when that's your day.

Not the case when you're older. Unless you drive a plow, winter weather is bad news. You don't get to play in the snow; you get to shovel it. You stop eating snow and start throwing salt on it. The only snowman in your yard is you, after you throw your back out and topple over into a snow bank because, let's face it, the snow around these parts gets heavy, and you've been inside eating and feeling hopeless all winter.



## Biological clock and circadian rhythm.

The cause of SAD is unknown, but it may have to do with the disruption of our circadian rhythms. The circadian biological clock is something built-in to plants, animals, and humans that puts our bodies on a 24-hour cycle, more or less. The formal study of this phenomena is called chronobiology. After reading more on this topic, it's no wonder humans feel depressed during fall and winter.

Another possible cause is a drop in melatonin levels. Melatonin is a natural hormone that helps humans sleep. Because SAD changes sleep patterns, some doctors would advise a melatonin supplement during the long winter months to help combat these effects. For those of you not wanting to visit the doctors, you could always pick up a few Lazy Cakes: Relaxation Brownies. Last week, I noticed a box of these on the counter of the Irving gas station on Hathaway Road, after the stoned-looking Brownie on the wrapper caught my eye. Pot brownies in Massachusetts? No, just brownies packed full of melatonin, and enough of it to make your SAD symptoms go into hiding.



If you're going to deal with winter in New England, you might as well be prepared.

This year's winter was especially soul-crushing because of how often it snowed. On days when it didn't snow, we could go about our days and return home when we're done, content to not step foot outside until the next day. When it did snow, however, the snow had to be moved before the next day could begin. Compounding the problem for me is the fact that we rarely got just snow. I wish it would either snow, or rain, not both. The words "wintery mix" seem permanently ingrained on every Doppler radar screen that displays weather for the New Bedford area.

A few interesting tidbits on SAD: Although symptoms shown in men are usually more severe, women are diagnosed with it more often. Also, a person's distance from the equator seems to play a role in whether they feel symptoms of SAD or not, because longer periods of light and dark effect their biological clock more.

SAD is a strange condition, one that, as a byproduct of where we live, almost all of us have experience with in one way or another. If you don't display signs of SAD yourself, you definitely know someone who does. As this winter dissipates at

an excruciatingly slow rate, we are close enough to the end to look forward to better weather. Daylight savings has helped by giving us more daylight, and (if) it ever stops raining and gets warmer, we'll all be able to get outside and enjoy it.

Except of course, those of us who suffer from summer seasonal affective disorder.