

RoyalOakPatch

Seasonal Affective Disorder More Common Than You May Think

Ten percent of the general population living in colder climates such as Michigan suffer from SAD, according to Dr. Howard Belkin at Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak.

By Monica Mercer

Summer often seems like the "happy" season. Warm weather and longer days mean there are more possibilities for being active and doing fun things outside the home and office.

When winter sets in, all that can change. The days suddenly become shorter, many people arrive at and leave their jobs in darkness, and the frigid weather makes the thought of being outside unbearable.



While the environmental effects of this seasonal transition are hardly surprising for anyone who's lived through a Michigan winter, very few people are aware of how the change can affect emotional health, said Dr. Howard Belkin, a psychiatrist affiliated with Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak.

Belkin said even fewer people are aware that there's a name for the affliction—seasonal affective disorder, or SAD—despite the fact that 10 percent of the general population living in colder climates will continue to suffer from it as winter trudges along in the New Year.

"It's more common than you would imagine," said Belkin, who has a private counseling practice in Birmingham. "About 10 percent of my patients come to see me in the fall and winter feeling bad with a general level of unhappiness, and they don't know why."

SAD, also known as the "holiday blues," affects each person differently, Belkin said, but it generally is marked by a low-grade depression triggered by the onset of the cold winter months. Certain people will suffer a variety of symptoms, including a more depressed mood, sleep disturbances, loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed, guilt, low energy and the inability to concentrate.

In people more prone to depressive disorders, SAD can actually lead to full-blown depression and suicidal thoughts if not treated, Belkin said.

Ashley Ferguson, 26, of Royal Oak said she has heard of people being depressed in the winter months, but she was not aware of SAD. She said she does not think it has

ever affected her significantly, but she is aware of feeling more depressed during the cold months.

"I don't feel the greatest in wintertime," Ferguson admitted.



While sufferers may otherwise feel fine in the spring and summer months and tend to wonder where all these low feelings are coming from, Belkin said SAD is not so inexplicable when you pause to think about what is actually happening at this time of year.

"Life starts to be about work, driving to and from work and being home," Belkin explained. "People feel cooped up, and the four walls of the house start closing in."

Adding to this cabin fever is the stress of the holidays, Belkin said, a time when people are expected to be merry and full of joy amid a physical environment that is not exactly conducive to such emotional displays. The holidays can also bring on feelings of unmet expectations, a wish for perfection, missing loved ones and financial stresses.

When mixed together, all these things can be a potent recipe for SAD.

"The holidays themselves cause an enormous amount of pressure," Belkin noted.

Fortunately, most sufferers will get better, Belkin said. As with all depressive disorders, there is usually an underlying psychological component to SAD, he said. Remove these components, such as holiday stresses and the emotional effects of cold weather, and SAD tends to go away.

Dr. Hallie Armstrong, N.D., a naturopathic doctor in the integrative medicine department at Beaumont Hospital, believes in a natural approach to easing the symptoms of SAD. Regular exercise and eating enough protein are key, she said. Cases that seem more severe may warrant testing for vitamin D levels because lack of sunlight may cause deficiencies of the vitamin, resulting in depressive symptoms.

Belkin cautioned that SAD should not be ignored, even if it seems like a mild case.

"The most important part of dealing with SAD is recognizing it," Belkin said. "Talk therapy is the main treatment. Start talking about it with friends and family. And then, if you really feel like it's starting to affect you significantly, see a doctor."

Published: December 30, 2010