

**Food For Thought**  
**From Your Employee Assistance Program**

## ***Seasonal Affective Disorder***

During the fall and winter months, some people experience symptoms of depression which can appear gradually or come on all at once. They often lessen as spring arrives and stay in remission through the summer months. For some people this is a sign that they suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD.

Symptoms of SAD usually appear during the colder months of fall and winter, when there is less exposure to sunlight during the day. SAD can be difficult to diagnose, since many of the symptoms are similar to those of depression. Symptoms can include, but are not limited to:

- sadness
- anxiety
- irritability
- inability to concentrate
- change in appetite
- craving foods high in carbohydrates
- weight gain
- decreased energy/fatigue
- tendency to oversleep and
- avoidance of social situations

According to the American Psychiatric Association, SAD has been linked to a biochemical imbalance in the brain prompted by shorter days and a lack of sunlight in winter. As seasons change, people experience a shift in their biological clock or circadian rhythm that can cause them to be out of step with their daily schedule.

Researchers have proved that bright light makes a difference to the brain chemistry, although the exact means by which sufferers are affected is not yet known. Some evidence suggests that the farther someone lives from the equator, the more likely they are to develop SAD. For example, approximately 25 percent of the population of the middle-to-northern latitudes of the U.S. experience winter doldrums, a sub-clinical level of SAD. These people notice the return of SAD-like symptoms each winter, but remain functional.

The most difficult months for SAD sufferers seem to be January and February. Younger adults and women are thought to be at higher risk. SAD may begin at any age, but the main age of onset is between 18 and 30 years.

Increased exposure to sunlight can improve symptoms of SAD. This can be a long walk outside or arranging your home or office so that you are exposed to a window during the day.

Light therapy has proven an effective treatment option for more severe symptoms. Researchers have proved that bright light makes a difference to the brain chemistry, although the exact means by which sufferers are affected is not yet known. This form of therapy involves exposure to very bright light (usually from a special fluorescent lamp) between 30 and 90 minutes a day during the winter months. These light therapy sessions are best used during the morning hours. Additional relief has been found with psychotherapy sessions, and in some cases medication is prescribed.

If you feel that you are suffering from SAD, it is important to seek the help of a trained professional. With the right course of treatment, SAD can be a manageable condition.

Information on SAD and its treatment can be obtained from the National Institute of Mental Health website at [www.nimh.gov](http://www.nimh.gov). If you think that you or a loved one might have SAD, learn as much as you can about it. Find a health professional that is qualified to treat SAD and discuss treatments that are most appropriate. The DEA Employee Assistance Program (EAP) at 1-800-275-7460 can also provide information on treatment options related to SAD and other related disorders. The EAP provides a wide range of professional, confidential services to all DEA employees and family members.

**The DEA Employee Assistance Program  
1-800-275-7460**