

Mental Health Minute

Edie J. Anderson, LMFT
Mountains Edge Counseling

Winter Blues or Something More?

Winter in Wyoming can be a wonderful, sometimes even “magical” time of the year. With the snow capped Big Horn Mountains right in our backyard, there are many activities to participate in during the winter months. It is a joyous time to come together for the holidays. It means days filled with building snowmen, sledding, and drinking hot cocoa by the fire. But, for some, the changing of seasons can be a time of great sadness, darkness, and depression, which leaves some feeling anything BUT “magical”. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th edition (DSM-V), there is a disorder called Seasonal Affective Disorder, otherwise known as SAD. SAD is a type of depression displaying a recurring seasonal pattern. People who suffer from SAD often have feelings of depression, low energy, social withdrawal, weight gain, and hypersomnia. These symptoms specifically occur during winter months.

What causes SAD?

The exact cause for SAD is unknown, however, research done at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) gives us some insight on a few biological clues to the reason this disorder occurs in some, but not in others. Some people with SAD may have trouble regulating a key neurotransmitter involved in mood, Serotonin. Another biological clue is that some produce less Vitamin D than those who do not suffer from this disorder. Vitamin D is an important component in serotonin activity- which as mentioned earlier, helps regulate mood. A third possible piece to the puzzle is that people with SAD may overproduce the hormone melatonin. Darkness increases production of melatonin, which regulates sleep. As winter days become shorter, melatonin production increases, leaving people with SAD to feel sleepier and more lethargic, often with delayed circadian rhythms.

What are the risk factors of SAD?

According to the NIMH, there are several risk factors that are associated with this disorder. Attributes that may increase your risk of SAD include: being a female, living far from the equator, having a family history of depression, and younger adults have a higher risk of SAD than do older adults. SAD can even occur among children and teens.

Is there help?

There is always help. First and foremost, talk to your doctor and/or a mental health professional. There are several treatments/therapies available. Some of these include: light therapy, Vitamin D supplements, Psychotherapy, and medication (if symptoms are moderate to severe). The winter months can be fun and majestic, but if that isn't how you feel during this time you don't have to suffer in silence. And, hopefully, you can enjoy this time of year and all the “magic” that goes along with it.

