

SAD, continued

Importantly, winter SAD does not occur in a vacuum. When reduced daylight, social isolation, and disrupted routines intersect with heightened political polarization and constant media exposure, emotional strain can intensify—even for individuals without a formal diagnosis. A climate of uncertainty and tension amid societal challenges has the capacity to fuel rumination (repetitive negative thoughts and emotions), a common feature of depression. Simultaneously, relentless exposure to distressing news and images can deepen feelings of numbness, sadness, and/or despair. Emotional exhaustion linked to current events may also strain relationships, silence conversations, or discourage social connection, further reinforcing isolation during a winter season when support is most needed.

Diagnosis

While many people experience mild seasonal changes in mood that can improve with exercise, routine, and better sleep, SAD is different. [As Mental Health America explains](#), "*SAD is a form of clinical depression, often requiring psychiatric treatment*," and is therefore distinct from the winter blues.

According to the [National Institute of Mental Health \(NIMH\)](#), "individuals with Seasonal Affective Disorder experience noticeable changes in how they feel, think, and behave with the seasons. Symptoms typically include persistent low mood, fatigue, social withdrawal, difficulty concentrating, and changes in sleep or appetite. SAD is a type of depression characterized by a recurrent seasonal pattern, with symptoms lasting approximately four to five months each year."

This definition is consistent with other medical authorities, including the [Mayo Clinic](#), which describes SAD as a form of depression related to reduced sunlight and seasonal changes that disrupt internal biological rhythms.

Possible Causes

The exact cause of Seasonal Affective Disorder is not fully understood, but several factors are believed to contribute:

- **Circadian rhythm disruption:** Reduced sunlight in fall and winter can interfere with the body's internal clock, leading to depressive symptoms.
- **Serotonin changes:** Lower sunlight exposure may reduce serotonin levels, a neurotransmitter that affects mood.
- **Melatonin imbalance:** Seasonal changes can disrupt melatonin production, affecting sleep patterns and emotional regulation.

Treatment Options

Effective treatments for SAD are available and may include:

- Light therapy
- Regular physical activity
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Medication, when appropriate

[Click here to learn more about symptoms and treatment.](#)

As winter's reduced light places strain on mental health, ongoing political turmoil and social division add another layer of stress. Together, these forces can leave many people feeling depleted, disconnected, and overwhelmed. This season and all through the year, tending to mental health is not an act of withdrawal; it's an act of resilience! Focusing on your mental health is a necessary step in staying grounded, connected, and engaged with the world around us.

If you or someone you care about is experiencing symptoms of depression that worsen during the winter months, the following resources may be helpful.

Resources

1. <https://mhanational.org/resources/life-seasonal-affective-disorder-sad/>
2. www.mhanj.org
3. [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#), Call or text 988, Chat on the Website
4. [New Jersey MentalHealthCares](#) - Call (866) 202-HELP (4357)
5. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/seasonal-affective-disorder>
6. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20364651>