

Strategies to Reduce Triggers During the Fall Season

Fall has arrived. Temperatures have dropped, kids have returned to school, and the holidays are around the corner. This is a time for sweatshirts and snuggling in blankets around campfires. The days are getting shorter as the sun sets earlier each day and the leaves are changing from green to a vibrant purple, yellow, orange, or red.

It is also a time when the pressures of life increase. Schedules are full and finances are tight. For some, work has slowed and they need to get a second job. Shorter days bring less sunlight. The holidays are a few short months away. These changes can be triggers for someone with depression or who is in recovery.

What Is Seasonal Affective Disorder (Sad) and How Does It Relate to Recovery?

Many people can struggle as we enter fall, including someone in recovery. [The National Institute of Mental Health](#) (NIMH) defines Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) as a type of depression that happens with the changing of seasons. Symptoms can be different depending on the seasonal change. As we enter the fall, you may find yourself or your loved one oversleeping but never feeling rested. Your appetite may have increased, leading to an increase in weight gain. According to the NIMH, Seasonal Affect Disorder can happen with mood disorders such as substance abuse, there is likely a seasonal pattern of misuse due to self-medicating.

Other signs and symptoms of SAD may include:

- Feeling depressed for part of the day, almost every day
- Not enjoying the activities you have in the past
- Lacking energy
- Trouble sleeping
- Appetite changes
- Feeling sluggish and/or irritated
- Loss of concentration
- Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, and/or guilty
- Having regular thoughts of death and/or suicide

It is a normal, human response, to have days where you feel sad. Bad days, sometimes bad weeks happen. However, if you are overwhelmed with these feelings regularly and

you can't get yourself motivated to face your everyday tasks, call your medical and/or mental health provider.

How Does Someone Get Seasonal Affective Disorder?

[MedlinePlus](#) mentions that there is not a direct cause for SAD. However, research supports that a person with SAD can have an imbalance of serotonin, which is a chemical in the brain that affects mood. It notes a correlation with an increase in the sleep hormone, melatonin, which controls sleep. Low vitamin D can also be a cause.

What Is the Treatment for SAD?

NIMH says that symptoms of SAD can generally improve with the passing of the season. However, symptoms can improve with treatment. There are several types of treatments available, including light therapy, talk therapy, antidepressant medication, and/or a combination of the three. It is important for you or a loved one in a substance abuse program to receive treatment for SAD while continuing treatment for substance abuse.

How Does Light Therapy Work?

Light therapy comprises sitting in front of a lightbox. This box filters out harmful UV rays and gives off a bright light. It is a replacement for natural light during the winter months. It takes twenty minutes or more a day, and most people can feel better within two weeks. For some, increasing their time outside, in the sunlight, or through an open window can reduce symptoms. It is important to continue the use of light therapy until the fall and winter seasons have passed.

Cognitive Behavior Therapy as It Relates to Sad and Recovery

[Cognitive Behavior Therapy](#) (CBT) is a form of talk therapy that's considered the most effective for SAD. According to NIMH, CBT

“relies on basic techniques of CBT such as identifying negative thoughts and replacing them with more positive thoughts along with a technique called behavioral activation. Behavioral activation seeks to help the person identify activities that are engaging and pleasurable, whether indoors or outdoors, to improve coping with winter.”

It is, also, an effective type of therapy used to help manage substance abuse. The focus is on reframing negative thinking and changing how you respond to life stressors.

Medication for the Treatment of SAD

NIMH states that Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) are the go-to antidepressant medications used to treat SAD. The FDA has also approved bupropion, a different type of antidepressant, for treatment. There are, however, risks to taking medications and should be thoroughly discussed with your treatment provider.

Finding the best treatment for you and/or your loved one can take time, but it is worth the effort to find a way to enjoy the cool days of fall. To take that drive through the country, to see the dynamic change in the leaves, and to drink that hot apple cider beside the bonfire with supportive friends.