



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD): Signs & Solutions

“Just remember, in the winter; Far beneath the bitter snows; Lies the seed, that with the sun's love; In the spring, becomes the rose.” ~ Bette Midler

Recent studies reveal that Colorado is one of the happiest states in the country. Our weather, outdoor activities, and powerful Rocky Mountains are big contributors to these results. We know that a positive mood is one of the largest factors to good health, and part of a positive mood comes with getting some sun. Two chemicals in the brain, melatonin (sleep) and serotonin (sense of well-being), help to regulate our sleep-wake cycles, energy levels, and mood. The levels of these two chemicals change depending on sunlight exposure.

During fall and winter, when the days are shorter and there are more hours of darkness, levels of melatonin increase and serotonin decrease. This type of weather triggers the brain and body to start our annual hibernation of sorts that happens psychologically and biologically during the fall and winter months. A reduction in the amount of sunlight slows us down a bit, children and parents buckle down again at work and at school, and there are several holiday celebrations that keep us indoors eating and socializing. We all experience internal changes as the seasons change, but for some people that change can be dramatic. The change in seasons coincide with depression symptoms for individuals who suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD. The symptoms include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Irritability
- Tiredness or low energy
- Problems getting along with other people
- Hypersensitivity to rejection
- Heavy, "leaden" feeling in the arms or legs
- Oversleeping
- Appetite changes, especially a craving for foods high in carbohydrates
- Weight gain

When these symptoms are experienced seasonally, an individual might be suffering from SAD. We can all experience some of these symptoms periodically, but like most things, moderation is the key. If you are experiencing these symptoms continuously over weeks or months, and these symptoms are impacting your ability to function at work or at home, it's time to see your primary care physician for a check-up.

Most individuals can experience the change to fall and winter with mild symptoms, but some people, roughly 6 in 100, will experience the severe symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD. SAD symptoms include: changes in mood, lack of enjoyment, low energy, changes in sleep patterns, changes in eating habits, difficulty concentrating, and less time socializing. While some people need to treat SAD with light therapy lamps inside their homes, we in Colorado have outdoor “light therapy” 325 days a year. So take advantage of it! Weather permitting, go for a walk before work, take your lunch outside, spend time on your patio or deck, spend time getting your garden ready for winter, rake those fall leaves, etc.

Even though we have very busy days that involve many hours in the office or in court, we can still dedicate a few minutes every day to being outside. We all know the dangers of spending too much time in the sun. But, as with most things, moderation is the key. There are many benefits of sunlight, including lowered blood pressure, increased ability for the body to deliver oxygen to the tissues, increased immune function, and lowered cholesterol. Experts suggest at least 10-15 minutes of sunlight a day, without sunglasses, to reap the benefits. The good news is that there are several treatments available to help with SAD, including light therapy, medications, psychotherapy, nutritional supplements, acupuncture, yoga, and massage therapy.

To find out more about SAD, check out the following links:

<http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/basics/definition/con-20021047>

<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/sad>

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0002499/>

Click more to read more about the benefits of getting enough sunlight every day:

<http://www.sunshinevitamin.org/>

*By Sarah Myers, JD, LMFT, LAC
Clinical Director, Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program
September 2013*

© Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program, 2017

Your Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program provides free and confidential services for judges, lawyers, and law students. If you need resources for ANY issue that is compromising your ability to be a productive member of the legal community, or if there is someone you are concerned about, contact COLAP at (303) 986-3345. For more information about COLAP, please visit www.coloradolap.org.