

---

# SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER IN THE FALL

“A SMOOTH SEA NEVER MADE A SKILLED SAILOR.”

~Franklin D. Roosevelt

BY SARAH MYERS ESQ., LMFT, LAC

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.

Research shows that whether you personally observe children returning to school or not, we can all experience an increase in anxiety and its companion, depression, this time of year. Memory is a powerful tool, and the associations made between the weather and events that occurred in our past mean that both can be “triggers” for the feelings we had during the events. For example, if you experienced something traumatic (death of a loved one, divorce, losing a big case, etc.) in September, your brain will pair the feelings you experienced with the “feel” of that time of year. During the anniversary of the event(s), when you feel the September weather and see the leaves changing again the next year, you could experience anxiety, stress, depression, anger, and a multitude of other emotionally-charged responses even though the event is over. Alternatively, if there is a stressful or anxiety-producing event that repeats itself for years at the same time each year, such as the return to school, that can become a strong imprint on our memory.

Photo by Ig Botta Ph on Unsplash

---

---

**W**e 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

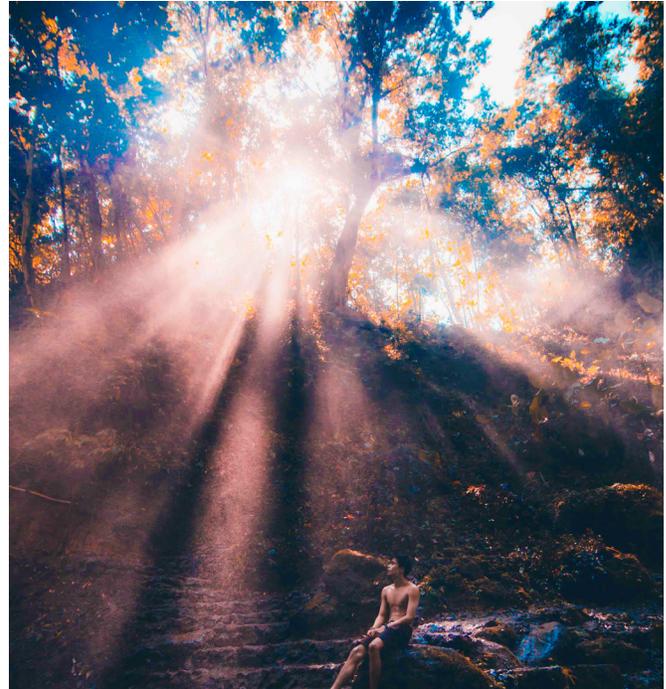


Photo by Visuals of Dana on Unsplash

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, 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.

---

---

**A**nd, when we have fun, we release the healthiest chemicals in our body, including endorphins. When released, endorphins reduce our perception of physical and psychological pain or stress. They ward off anxiety, depression, and improve sleep; they also make you feel HAPPY, which in turn boosts your immune system, increases intimacy, and protects you from the damaging effects of stress.

How can you release endorphins? Simple.

- 1. Laugh:** At yourself, a movie, a TV show, a funny or ironic situation happening around you, with friends, with your spouse, with your children. **JUST LAUGH MORE!** Challenge yourself to laugh at least 10 times in a day. See what happens.
- 2. Eat chocolate:** We all know that dark chocolate is best, but pretty much any kind will boost your mood. Just watch the quantity. As with most things, moderation is the key!
- 3. Love:** Intimacy with a partner/spouse releases massive quantity of endorphins. Single? Not to worry. Intimacy with friends and family works to release happy chemicals in your body too.
- 4. Listen to music:** Make sure it is a style that you enjoy, and your body and mind will thank you.
- 5. Eat spicy foods:** Eating spicy foods, such as chilis, cause the body to release endorphins to override the momentary painful sensation on the tongue.
- 6. Meditation:** Sitting quietly and focusing only on your breath for a few minutes or better yet, an hour a day allows our ever-working legal minds to REST. The body will reward you for it.
- 7. Acupuncture, Massage, and Exercise:** Our bodies reward us when we move them. Holistic methods like acupuncture and massage help move stagnant tissue in the body and exercise moves muscles.
- 8. Laugh:** Oh, we already mentioned this one. Probably because it is the most important!

Sarah Myers, Esq., LMFT, LAC, is the Executive Director of the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP). COLAP is the free, confidential and independent well-being program for the legal community of Colorado. For more information, go to [www.coloradolap.org](http://www.coloradolap.org). For a confidential consultation, discussion about your stressors, or to obtain helpful resources, contact COLAP at 303-986-3345 or [info@coloradolap.org](mailto:info@coloradolap.org).