

Not Everyone Feels That It's The Season To Be Jolly

By Wendy Hladick, PA-C

'Tis the season to be jolly?

I've been having trouble concentrating lately. My usual abundant energy level has plummeted downward. Even my sleep seems restless.

But come to think of it, I have noticed a gradual decline of spirit since autumn, and living in this northern latitude, I am familiar with the onset of "the winter blues." For an estimated 35 million Americans, the symptoms can be much more severe, however. They suffer from seasonal affective disorder – easily shortened to SAD.

The "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders" has recognized SAD as a seasonally depressive illness that generally occurs during October or November but disappears from mid-February to mid-April.

Symptoms can cause depressed mood, diminished interest in life, weight loss or weight gain, trouble sleeping or sleeping too much, restlessness or boredom and generalized fatigue. Research has shown SAD is much more common in the northern latitude than it is in Florida, for example. It is also four times more common in women than in men and is very common in age groups under 40 years of age.

Although several "neuro transmitters" or chemical messengers in the brain have been implicated in the origin of SAD, light deprivation seems to be the culprit. Humans secrete hormones from the pineal gland, a pea-sized structure nestled in the center of the brain in response to the amount of light hitting our eyes. These hormones help keep us in sync with the rhythms of the day and the season.

Prevention of SAD can occur first with understanding and recognition of its symptoms. If you have had three yearly episodes of such symptoms and symptoms that have occurred two years in a row in a seasonal pattern, you could be suffering from SAD.

To supplement winter's stingy supply of rays, phototherapy or the controlled exposure to bright light has become a popular treatment for SAD. Because it is still unclear how this light improves general well-being, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) still classifies light boxes as experimental. The cost of light boxes ranges from \$185 - \$500, but there have been a slowly increasing number of health plans that cover the use. It is worthy to note that our mental health facility in the Iliuliuk Family and Health Services clinic has light sources available for purchase and use.

If you think you have SAD, you should discuss the problem with your health care provider or mental health professional. For more information about light therapy or SAD, you can call Paula Ary, MSW or Elaine Fahrenkamp, PhD at 581-1202.