



Winter
2009

Compeer Helena a program of Rocky Mountain Development Council

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Mayo Clinic
December 2008

Please remember to
turn in your Compeer
Survey by
January 31, 2008

Like many people, you may develop cabin fever during the winter months. Or you may find yourself eating more or sleeping more when the temperature drops and darkness falls earlier. While those are common and normal reactions to the changing seasons, people with seasonal affective disorder (SAD) experience a much more serious reaction when summer shifts to fall and on to winter.

With seasonal affective disorder, fall's short days and long nights may trigger feelings of depression, lethargy, fatigue and other problems. Don't brush this off as simply a case of the "winter blues" that you have to tough out on your own.

Seasonal affective disorder is a type of depression, and it can severely impair your daily life. That said, treatment — which may include light box therapy — can help you successfully manage seasonal affective disorder. You don't have to dread the dawning of each fall or winter.

Seasonal affective disorder is a cyclic, seasonal condition. This means that signs and symptoms usually come back and go away at the same times every year. Usually, seasonal affective disorder symptoms appear during late fall or early winter and go away during the warmer, sunnier days of spring and summer. But some people have the opposite pattern, developing seasonal affective disorder with the onset of spring or summer. In either case, problems may start out mild and become more severe as the season progresses.

Fall and winter SAD (winter depression)

Symptoms of winter-onset seasonal affective disorder include:

- Depression
- Hopelessness
- Anxiety
- Loss of energy
- Social withdrawal

Special points of interest:

- Compeer Helena has successfully recruited and trained 12 volunteers, 11 matched with mental health consumers and 1 volunteer awaiting a match.
- The 11 volunteers who are matched have provided over 483 hours of volunteer service to individuals who are receiving mental health treatment in the past eight months.
- Compeer Helena currently has 29 mental health consumers who have been referred to the program, 11 of which have been assigned Compeer Friends.
- Compeer Helena is working with 10 therapists from the community.
- Volunteers come from different backgrounds and are in professions such as legal secretaries, dentist, addiction counselors, medical assistants, graduate students, and social workers.

- Oversleeping
- Loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Appetite changes, especially a craving for foods high in carbohydrates
- Weight gain
- Difficulty concentrating and processing information

The specific cause of seasonal affective disorder remains unknown. It's likely, as with many mental health conditions, that genetics, age and perhaps most importantly, your body's natural chemical makeup all play a role in developing seasonal affective disorder.

Specifically, the culprits may include:

- **Your circadian rhythm.** Some researchers suspect that the reduced level of sunlight in fall and winter may disrupt the circadian rhythm in certain people. The circadian rhythm is a physiological process that helps regulate your body's internal clock — letting you know when to sleep or wake. Disruption of this natural body clock may cause depression.
- **Melatonin.** Some researchers theorize that seasonal affective disorder may be tied to melatonin, a sleep-related hormone that, in turn, has been linked to depression. The body's production of melatonin usually increases during the long nights of winter.
- **Serotonin.** Still other research suggests that a lack of serotonin, a natural brain chemical (neurotransmitter) that affects mood, may play a role. Reduced sunlight can cause a drop in serotonin, perhaps leading to depression.

Although seasonal affective disorder commonly begins in young adulthood, it's uncommon in people younger than 20. Some studies show that it's diagnosed more often in women, but that men may have more severe symptoms.

Data about how common seasonal affective disorder is and who is most likely to develop the condition are lacking. Some evidence shows that factors that may increase the risk of developing seasonal affective disorder include:

- **Northern locations.** Some evidence suggests that seasonal affective disorder is more common among people who live in higher latitudes — or farther from the equator.
- **Family history.** Some studies have shown that people with SAD are more likely to have family members with the condition. But research about a potential genetic component has been mixed.

To read more on this condition: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/seasonal-affective-disorder>

**If you are interested in becoming a Compeer Volunteer or would like more information on this wonderful program, please contact:
Compeer Helena at 406-457-7319.**