

*Maryland State Bar Association Lawyer Assistance Program  
Wellness Tip Sheet*

**How do shorter days affect your mental health?**

As fall and winter approach so do shorter days and less sunshine. What impact does this have on your mental health? Do you notice yourself feeling more tired, depressed, having decreased interest in work and other activities, craving sweets and starches or having an overall lack of energy? If so, you may be suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). SAD goes beyond the feelings of the "winter blahs" or "cabin fever". This condition is characterized by recurrent episodes of depression that occurs in relation to the seasons, most commonly beginning in winter – alternating with periods of normal mood the rest of the year.

**What is Seasonal Affective Disorder?**

As the days become shorter during fall and winter, some people experience a change in mood. SAD is a form of depression in which people that have normal mental health throughout most of the year experience depressive symptoms beginning in late fall and continuing through winter. As the seasons change and spring approaches the depressive symptoms subside.

The causes of SAD are unknown, but it is thought to be related to several factors, including seasonal variations of light, body temperature and hormone regulation during the colder months. One theory is that as seasons and sunlight patterns change and days become shorter there is a shift in our "biological internal clock".

It has been shown that SAD occurs more commonly in colder climates. Some researchers believe the lack of sunlight disrupts our body's daily rhythms which regulate our internal clock and our moods.

**Symptoms of SAD**

- Increased sleep at night and excessive daytime sleepiness
- Difficulty waking up in the morning
- Afternoon slumps with decreased energy and concentration

- Depression that starts in fall or winter
- Increased appetite craving especially sweets and carbohydrates
- Slow, sluggish, lethargic movement
- Withdrawal from friends, family, and social activities
- Depression, pessimism, and lack of pleasure

**Treatment Options\*\*:**

**Light-box Therapy**

A common initial treatment is Light-box Therapy. Bright light treatment, which goes beyond the capabilities of traditional bulbs, is designed to provide intense illumination. The light box has proven to be effective at doses of 2500 – 10,000 lux. The sufferer sits a prescribed distance in front of the light with his/her eyes open. Treatment times vary but typically begin with 10 – 15 minutes and increase to 30 -60 minutes.

**Other Treatment Options:**

- Antidepressant medication
- Cognitive behavior therapy
- Spending more time outdoors
- Hormone therapy

**\*\*Please speak with your physician to determine the treatment that may be right for you.**

*Call the Lawyer Assistance Program for free, confidential assistance and speak to a counselor at*

*410-685 7878 x 3041 or toll free at 800-492-1964*

