

Seasonal Affective Disorder

(with gratitude to Aimee Igloliorte, Aromatherapy Student, STC, 2005)

1. Symptoms of Winter Depression

The weather affects the way people feel—happy on a sunny day or low in energy and dragging on a grey, rainy day. Advertisers use sunlight to convey happiness, positive feelings and enjoyment so that potential buyers will view the product in the same “light”

For example, this is used frequently in television advertisements for cold medicine. In most cases the ad will start out with someone feeling “under the weather”—experiencing the typical flu-like symptoms—and as soon as he or she takes the cold medicine, the sun starts to shine brightly and the symptoms disappear.

For some people, the weather will change their mood however other people experience more dramatic symptoms and suffer from a syndrome called Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD.

In Canada, many people suffer from SAD, which may be related to the length of our winters. The short period of daylight and cold weather exposes many Canadians to the possibility of suffering SAD. The most common type of SAD is known as “winter depression”. For many it begins late in fall or early winter and continues throughout the winter. It will begin to alleviate in spring and by summer is gone.

2. SAD Symptoms Cross-Referenced with Depression

Seasonal affective disorder (“affective” is a psychiatric term for mood), or SAD, is a type of depression that follows the seasons. SAD has many of the symptoms of depression, which are related to the seasons of the year and more specifically to changes in the amount of daylight.¹

Approximately four to six percent of people in the United States suffer from SAD and another 10 to 20 percent may have mild SAD. **In Canada, SAD affects between three and five percent of adults**, while another 10 to 15 percent have a milder form of the

same disorder. SAD is four times more common in women than in men. Women between the ages of 20 and 40 are the most susceptible to SAD.ⁱⁱ

Researchers believe that SAD results from the shorter day-length in winter. Recent studies estimate that SAD is more common in northern countries because the winter day gets shorter as you go farther north. Interestingly, in Vancouver where winters may not be as cold as they are elsewhere in Canada, but where dark grey days are the norm, a relatively high incidence of SAD has been noted. Conversely, people who move south, where the hours of daylight are longer and winters sunnier, are less likely to experience SAD.ⁱⁱⁱ

2.1 Depression

So, what is depression? Clinical depression is a mood disorder in which feelings of sadness, loss, anger or frustration interfere with everyday life for an extended time period. Depression is generally measured and ranked in terms of severity—mild, moderate, or severe. The degree of your depression influences the treatment you and your health care providers may choose.

Symptoms of depression include:

- Trouble sleeping or excessive sleeping
- Dramatic change in appetite, often either weight gain or loss
- Fatigue and/or lack of energy
- Extreme difficulty concentrating
- Agitation, restlessness and irritability
- Inactivity and withdrawal from usual activities
- Feelings of hopelessness and/or helplessness
- Recurring thoughts of death and/or suicide

Depression often runs in families. This may be heredity or learned behaviour or a combination of both. Even with a genetic predisposition, it is usually a stressful or unhappy life event that triggers the onset of a depressive episode.

Depression may be brought on by:

- Disappointment at home, work or school
- Death of a friend, loved one, relative or pet
- Prolonged pain or having a major illness
- Medical conditions such as hypothyroidism (under-active thyroid), cancer or hepatitis
- Drugs such as sedatives or high blood pressure medications
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Chronic stress
- Childhood events, for example abuse or neglect
- Social isolation (common in the elderly)
- Nutritional deficiencies, for example lacking in omega-3 fatty acids
- Sleeping problems
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Depression is more frequently reported in women than men and is especially common during the teen years.

Depression is also associated with low self-esteem.^{iv}

2.2 Symptoms of SAD

Table 2.1: Symptoms of winter depression^v

Symptom	Description
Sleep problems	Increased sleep, but not feeling refreshed
Increased appetite	Over-eating with carbohydrate craving, leading to weight gain
Depression	Feelings of despair, guilt, anxiety and hopelessness
Interpersonal difficulties (family/social problems)	Avoid company, become irritable, loss of libido and loss of feelings
Lethargy/Fatigue Leaden paralysis	Too tired to cope and everything is an effort.

	A feeling of heaviness in the arms or legs.
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2.3 Theories explaining SAD

Scientists still do not have a clear biological explanation of SAD. However, most agree that it is most likely linked to the lack of natural light in winter. The current theory suggests that the absence of light causes the body to reduce its production of the mood-lifting brain drug known as **serotonin**. Serotonin makes us feel good, we produce less and we feel “down”.

Another theory suggests that the lack of light during the winter months changes our internal clocks, much the same way that jet lag does, by changing our melatonin levels. These studies indicate that the pineal gland, which lies behind our forehead in the centre of the brain just above the eyes, is linked to the optic nerves. The pineal gland is responsible for hormone production in the body and hormonal imbalance is linked to depression.

So, what can we do for Season Affective Disorder?

2.4 Treatment

2.4.1 Allopathic/Conventional medical treatments

Traditional anti-depressant drugs such as **tricyclics**, i.e. amitriptyline are not usually helpful for SAD sufferers. They tend to increase the sleepiness and general lethargy that are the symptoms of SAD.

The non-sedative **SSRI** drugs (Selective Serotonin Re-uptake Inhibitors) such as sertraline (marketed under the name Lustral), paroxetine (marketed under the name Seroxat) and fluoxetine (which we know commonly by its market name, Prozac) are effective in alleviating the depressive symptoms of SAD. They are often used in combination with “light therapy”, an alternative natural approach to SAD treatment we will consider shortly. However, the side-effects are well-documented and as SAD only lasts for a few short months, we should consider carefully before going on to a drug-regime. However, it is an effective option for some.

Other **psychotropic drugs** such as lithium or benzodiazepines have not proved widely useful in the treatment of SAD. ^{vi}

2.4.2 Nutritional Supplements

Nutritional supplements are used to alleviate symptoms by increasing the levels of natural chemicals in the body.

One of the newest natural supplements used to help fight the symptoms of SAD is **5-hydroxytryptophan (known as 5-HTP)**. This supplement is derived from tryptophan, which is an amino acid found in high-protein food like chicken, beef, fish and dairy products. 5-HTP is automatically converted into serotonin once it hits the brain. Serotonin is a natural mood lifter, and as I mentioned earlier, lack of serotonin is indicated in cases of SAD.

Vitamin D and Omega-3 supplements taken during the winter months can also be beneficial. Studies have indicated that some places further north than Canada, including Iceland and Northern Russia, do not produce as high a percentage of SAD sufferers as we do. This may be due to the large amount of fish included in their diets. Fish are high in omega-3 and vitamin D. ^{vii}

The herb **St. John's Wort** is a popular supplement used by those with SAD. St. John's Wort increases **serotonin and norepinephrine**, which are both feel good hormones. It also increases **melatonin levels**; and as we mentioned earlier melatonin production appears to play a role in SAD by helping to regulate sleep patterns.

2.4.3 Light Therapy

Perhaps the simplest way to improve the way we feel when we do not have enough light is to increase the light.

Light therapy involves the exposure of a person to bright, artificial light each day for about thirty minutes. Now, we can't just sit under a regular lamp at home and expect it to work. We must use a specially designed light box, a specially designed light cap or a light visor.

Light therapy has proven an inexpensive and easy way to improve or completely alleviate symptoms of SAD. It has to be used daily, and it must be continued until the spring. Sometimes people feel an improvement and stop using their light therapy and the symptoms reappear.^{viii} So, it has to be a commitment from the end of autumn until the beginning of spring.

In addition, some people have indicated that the use of full spectrum lighting in their home or office has worked the same as light therapy, and I have even had a client who went regularly for a short tanning session when her symptoms were at their worst. It worked for her! Usually though, tanning beds are not recommended due to the high level of ultraviolet (UV) rays, which harm eyes and skin.^{ix}

Light therapy has been indicated to significantly improve 60 to 70 percent of SAD patients.^x

2.4.4 Aromatherapy and SAD

Aromatherapy treatments have a wonderful energizing, uplifting effect on the nervous system and help lift spirits. There is substantial research on the effectiveness of aromatherapy in the treatment of depression. Aromatherapy helps relieve depression by relaxing the body and reviving the nervous system.^{xi}

Traditional Holistic Aromatherapy is defined as both a Healing Art and the Science of utilizing natural distilled extracts from aromatic plants to heal the body, mind, emotions and spirit. Aromatherapists seek to explore the psychological and spiritual aspects of an individual's response to aromatic extracts and enhance the innate healing process. As an holistic therapy Aromatherapy is both a preventative approach to well-being and an active treatment during acute and chronic stages of illness or 'dis'ease.

Massage and aromatherapy go hand-in-hand for treating nervous system ailments such as depression^{xii} and therefore aromatherapy massage is one of the best aromatherapy treatments for SAD. The SAD client benefits from the therapeutic affects of the essential oils and the therapeutic effects of touch. Aromatic baths and inhalations are also effective for SAD sufferers.

Table 2.2: SAD Symptoms cross-referenced with Depression

Symptoms	Essential Oil	
Sleep problems	Bergamot Roman chamomile Lavender Lemon	Sweet marjoram Neroli Sweet orange Sandalwood
Interpersonal difficulties: Irritability	Frankincense Geranium Lavender	Neroli Ylang ylang
Interpersonal difficulties: Loss of libido	Jasmine Neroli Peppermint	Rose Sandalwood Ylang ylang
Lethargy/fatigue	Bergamot Grapefruit	Lemon Peppermint
Leaden paralysis	Grapefruit Geranium	Sweet orange Tangerine

Aromatherapy is most effective when used as a complementary therapy, assisting other therapies.^{xiii}

4 Conclusion

To conclude,

- SAD is a type of depression that follows the seasons.
- Although scientists still do not have a clear biological explanation of SAD, most agree it is probably linked to the lack of natural light in winter.
- Canadians appear to be more susceptible to SAD due to the shorter length of day during our winter

- There are numerous treatments for SAD, including
- - Pharmaceutical drugs
 - Nutritional supplementation
 - Light therapy
 - Aromatherapy
 - Touch therapies, including but not discussed today due to time constraints:
 - Reflexology
 - Reiki
 - Registered massage therapy
 - Therapeutic touch
 - Bowen method
 - Acupressure
 - Shiatsu
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In addition, other effective complementary therapies would include:

- Acupuncture
- Flower remedies
- Colour therapy
- Hypnotherapy

The choice is ours, but we do not have to suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder any more! If you have any questions...please do not hesitate to contact SCT.

ⁱ Understanding Seasonal Affective Disorder. (2005) *American Academy of Family Physicians* (On-line). Available: www.aafp.org/apf/980315ap/980315e.html Cited 2005 Jul. 5.

ⁱⁱ Depression in Special Circumstances: Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). (2005) *Canadian Network for Mood and Anxiety Treatments* (On-line). Available: www.canmat.org/depress/nine/depressbottom.html Cited 2005 Jul 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Depression. (2005) *Medline Plus. U>S. National Library of Medicine and National Institutes of Health* (On-line) Available: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003213.htm> Cited 2005 June 29

^v Information about SAD. (2005) *Outside in*. (on-line) Available: <http://www.outsidein.co.uk/sadinfo.htm>
Cited 2005 June 29

^{vi} Murray-Doran, Lisa. Seasonal Affective Disorder. (2005). *The Barefoot Doctor Naturopathic Clinic*
(On-line) Available: <http://www.barefootdoctor.org> Cited 2005 June 29

^{vii} Rachel, Anna. "Sining the light on depression." *Viva magazine* Feb/Mar 2005: 54

^{viii} Understanding Seasonal Affective Disorder. (2005) *American Academy of Family Physicians* (On-line).
Available: www.aafp.org/apf/980315ap/980315e.html Cited 2005 Jul. 5.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Frequently Asked Questions about Seasonal Affective Disorder. (2005). *University of British Columbia Department of Psychiatry* (On-line) Available: www.psychiatry.ubc.ca/mood/sad/sadfaq.htm Cited 2005 Jul 5.

^{xi} Battaglia, Salvatore. *The Complete Guide to Aromatherapy*. Brisbane,: Australian Academic Press, 2003

^{xii} Depression & Aromatherapy. (2005) *Holistic Online* (On-line) Available:
http://www.holisticonline.com/Remedies/Depresson/dep_aromatherapy.htm Cited 2005 Aug. 20

^{xiii} Ibid.