

Beating the w



Shining a Light on Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

by AMY ROTHENBERG, ND

feeling happy

Winter blahs,

Larry, a happily married man in his 40s, usually juggled his many roles as father, husband, son, and brother with considerable skill.

But come Autumn, he would begin a slip into his “long New England winter funk,” as he described it—or seasonal affective disorder (SAD), as his doctor had diagnosed. Larry would become irritable, fault-finding, and just plain “down.” He would have no energy to get to the gym and no desire to participate in family outings. Even though things were going well in general with his work and his family, the relentless dark winter days coupled with reduced time outdoors would lead to his predictable, seemingly inexorable depression.

It was November when Larry first came to my office seeking help, and by then, he had already begun his annual downward psychological slide. As he relayed his story, his face showed little emotion—he seemed “wiped out” physically and emotionally.

ier all year long

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Tis the season for depression

Seasonal affective disorder is a type of depression that most often afflicts people who live in cold, dark winter places, far from the equator. Incidence in the U.S. varies depending on where you live—from 1.4% of people in Florida to 9.9% in Alaska.* The degree of SAD symptoms can also differ for different people; some experience a relatively mild form of depression throughout the winter months; others dip into depression briefly at the change of seasons and come out of it after a few weeks; and still others feel severely debilitated by their symptoms all winter long. Women are more likely to suffer from SAD than men, and it tends to begin in early adulthood. (In rare cases, SAD symptoms can even appear on an opposite and unexpected schedule—from spring through fall.)

In SAD, similar to major depression, symptoms may include:

- Depressed feelings for a large part of the day, nearly every day
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Low energy
- Loss of interest in activities once enjoyed
- Sleep disturbances (either too much or not enough)
- Changes in food cravings, appetite, or weight (usually craving carbs)
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability and difficulty getting along with others
- Thoughts of death or suicide.

The conventional treatments for SAD include bright-light therapy, talk therapy, and pharmaceuticals such as antidepressants.

No one knows for sure why SAD occurs, but it is strongly suspected that reduced levels of sunlight in fall and winter may disrupt our body's internal clock and affect our Circadian rhythms,

leading to depression. A reduction in serotonin, a brain chemical that impacts mood may well be at play. A decrease in sunlight lowers serotonin levels, which in turn may lead to depression. Similarly, the change in season may disrupt the balance of the melatonin levels in the blood, which may influence both mood and sleep patterns.

Disinterested, distant, & detached

Larry told me that he felt uninspired, detached, and distant from his life during the winter months. “Nothing really interests me,” he sighed. He felt unengaged in his job at an insurance agency: “I just want to come home from work and lie on the couch.” His teenaged sons irritated him, and he felt put upon when asked to do anything. About his wife of 20 years, Larry said: “Of course, I absolutely adore her, but I find her annoying during my funk. It's strange, but I feel no affection toward her at these times.”

This was all in contrast to his usual temperament and attitude, which he

described as “loving and upbeat.” And sure enough, “When the days begin growing longer and the sun starts to shine more, I come back to myself,” Larry reported. “By the end of March, it's as if I'm a new person. I start getting energized and begin tackling all the projects and work-related things I've been avoiding or neglecting all winter long. ... And I'm suddenly back to normal with my wife and sons, too.”

A downward spiral

Larry had been suffering with his cyclical symptoms for more than a decade by the time I saw him, but each year, he was getting progressively worse. “Lately, probably the past four or five years, it seems like I go to a much darker place than before, and it's lasting longer, too,” he said. Larry had sought help from his medical doctor a few years earlier and was already using the prescribed phototherapy—a high-intensity lightbox—an hour each morning before work, during the fall and winter. “But I don't really notice it helping

Solutions for SAD from Natural Medicine



In addition to homeopathic treatment, I often recommend other naturopathic medicine approaches for patients suffering with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). Like homeopathy, this is not a one-size-fits-all approach. I individualize recommendations to the patient in front of me, giving specific dosages and assessing outcomes at our follow-up visits. Advice may include:

The Exercise Prescription

This is **essential** for anyone who is depressed. I help patients find physical activities they will enjoy and stick with. And if our first forays are not successful, we try another angle, perhaps adding music, or walking dates with a friend, or using a pedometer!

Dietary Recommendations

It is best to avoid food allergens and aim for a whole foods diet with limited processed food, limited refined carbohydrates, and lots of vegetables and fruits, along with healthy oils.

- **B Vitamins, especially Folic Acid and Vitamin B6:** B vitamins are known to play a role in emotional well-being and mental health.
- **St. John's Wort:** This herb can act as an antidepressant and is helpful for some people. **[DO NOT** take St. John's Wort if you are on anti-retrovirals, birth control pills, or other antidepressant medications. Do not take it in conjunction with lightbox therapy, as the herb can cause photosensitivity.]
- **SAME (S-adenosyl-L-methionine):** This chemical, naturally found in the human body, is also produced synthetically and available as a supplement; it can be helpful for certain people in the treatment of depression.
- **Fish Oil:** Taking fish oil is often helpful for mood and brain function.

Bright Ideas for Winter Blues

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much,” he said. He had also tried taking melatonin supplements, but it gave him bad dreams, so he stopped. “My doctor said I should try antidepressants next,” he said, “but I was hoping to avoid that, which is one reason I came to see you.”

In otherwise good health

After questioning Larry further, I learned that apart from SAD symptoms, he basically enjoyed excellent health. Besides a tendency for constipation, which was worse during wintertime, his digestion worked well. During these months he might wake up with nausea, which was better once he had breakfast. He had no issues with his respiratory system, urinary tract, musculoskeletal system, or skin. He did not often fall ill with colds, flus, and the like, and he reported no allergies. He did say that he tended to feel more chilly in his environment than others, and over the years, he had grown to hate the cold.

Given that Larry had chilliness, constipation, and a depressed mood, I made sure to order lab work to rule out a thyroid condition, which might display similar symptoms as SAD. Alas, his thyroid function was in the normal range, and other routine blood-test results looked good as well.

Looking for a remedy

When choosing a homeopathic remedy for a patient with SAD, I don't place great emphasis on the cyclical nature of the symptoms. There are many homeopathic remedies whose profiles include SAD-related symptoms, such as feeling worse in

the cold or feeling worse in the dark, but I have not found it helpful to focus primarily on those elements of the person's story. Rather, I base my homeopathic prescription on how the person experiences the SAD, how it makes them feel, what it prevents them from doing, and how they are affected physically, emotionally, and cognitively. I focus on the patient in front of me at that moment in time.

When looking for a homeopathic remedy for Larry, I asked myself, what is that is most limiting to him at this time? What is causing him the most distress? I decided it was his lack of feelings for all the people and activities he usually loved. That, combined with his chilliness, morning nausea, and constipation, led me to prescribe the remedy *Sepia officinalis*. The flat affect that Larry manifested was another good confirmatory symptom pointing me to *Sepia*.

A good fit for Larry

According to our homeopathic materia medica, *Sepia* is especially indicated for someone who is indifferent to those they love the best—particularly their spouse and family members. The person needing *Sepia* can be irritable and easily offended, with a preference for being alone. There is a sluggishness about them both mentally and physically, which can make them “indisposed to mental labor,” and also constipated. They are chilly in general



Start every day happy

Whether you have Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) or you just want to maximize your good moods during the bleak midwinter, following these three suggestions will go a long way toward staving off symptoms of SAD.

1 Go outside—every day!

We all know how a sunny day brightens our mood, but spending time outside on cloudy days also helps. So get out there and soak up some natural light and fresh air (well-bundled up, if necessary)! For the most benefit, go outside within one or two hours of rising each morning.

2 Stay active!

Exercising and staying physically active relieves stress, lifts your spirits, and improves your overall health. No wonder it's one of the top lifestyle suggestions for people with SAD! And if you brave the weather and exercise outdoors instead of indoors, you get a “two-fer.” For the most benefit, get most of your exercise earlier in the day.

3 Let there be light!

When the days get shorter and darker, focus on making your indoor environment as bright as possible during daylight hours—preferably with light from the outdoors. Throw open those curtains and shades, and move yourself closer to the windows. Clear away furniture or other obstructions that block light from entering your workspace or home—every little bit helps.

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and much worse from becoming cold or from cold weather. Nausea in the morning before eating is also a keynote indicator for the remedy *Sepia*.**

Other homeopathic remedies I considered for Larry but ruled out because I did not think they fit the entirety of his symptom profile were *Lycopodium* (irritability, constipation, chilliness) and *Nitricum acidum* (negativity, chilliness, complaining).

We do not often give men the remedy *Sepia*; it has much more affinity for women. But in the case of a patient such as Larry—with depression, flat affect, irritability, and a desire to remove oneself from life's commitments—it's good to

consider *Sepia*, whether the person is a woman or a man.

Some readers might wonder about Larry's lack of desire/motivation for physical activity, because we know from the homeopathic literature that those who need *Sepia* tend to crave vigorous exercise and feel better from it. While this may be true, we also sometimes see people needing *Sepia* who are, like Larry, in a more pathological state; their energy and vital force is so compromised that their need and desire for exercise has slipped away.

I prescribed one dose of *Sepia* 200c for Larry. I also reviewed with him some ideas for improving his constipation, highlighting a high fiber diet, adequate hydration, and the essential need for exercise. I'm not sure Larry could even grasp what I was telling him at that point

though, because he was feeling so down. We made an appointment for him to return for a follow-up visit in one month.

Turnaround in time for holidays

Larry came back to see me just before the holidays, and I could tell he was better right away. He had a warm and easy smile, which I had not seen before. He recounted a family outing he'd enjoyed: "I'm having fun hanging out with my sons again! Looking forward to picking out a nice tree and decorating it ... Things at work are humming along more smoothly ... My relationship with my wife is great—back to normal." He no longer suffered with morning nausea, and he was moving his bowels regularly. "I'm back to my regular gym routine, too ... and well, I'm just feeling myself again!" he said.

Like most people who have suffered

The conventional treatments for SAD include bright-light therapy, talk therapy, and pharmaceuticals such as antidepressants.

A Happy Light: Is it Right for You?

If you're suffering with mild "winter doldrums," counteract that by getting plenty of outdoor light in the mornings and keeping physically active. If that's not feasible and you want to try a lightbox for targeted phototherapy, do your research first. Not all "happy lights" are created equal. The Center for Environmental Therapeutics (CET) offers criteria for lightbox selection. Look for a light that has been tested in clinical trials, has ultra-violet filters, gives off 10,000 lux of illumination at a comfortable distance, and projects downward at an angle to minimize glare, they advise. (For comparison, here are approximate measures of outdoor illumination: sunlight 100,000 lux, full daylight 10,000-20,000 lux, overcast day 1000 lux, very dark day 100 lux, twilight 10 lux.)

While lightbox use for brief periods in the morning is generally safe, beware of risks for those who are photosensitive because of pre-existing conditions



or medications/herbs. Lightbox therapy can induce agitation in some people and manic episodes in those prone to bipolar disorder. CET also advises caution for people over age 50 at risk for macular degeneration, and favors lamps with less blue light (soft-white fluorescent with 3000-4000 Kelvin color ranges) rather than "day-light" or "full-spectrum" bulbs (5000 Kelvin range or higher). For those with retina disorders, CET advises extreme caution with lightbox use, including an ophthalmologist's supervision and blue-light blocking glasses, if used at all.

CET provides an abundance of additional information on non-medical treatment of SAD, depression, and circadian rhythm disorders on its website, along with helpful self-assessment tools. Visit www.cet.org.

Note: Anyone with severe SAD symptoms should also seek professional care.

depression and then found welcome relief, Larry told me he worried that his SAD symptoms would come back. I reassured him that his positive reaction to the homeopathic prescription was a good sign, and I believed this meant he was on a healing path that would likely continue. I told him that if his symptoms should return down the road, chances were good that additional homeopathic treatment would help him once again

Lasting improvement

It turns out that I did not prescribe any more doses of *Sepia* or any other remedy for Larry over the next several months, as he did not need anything. He continued to feel “like himself” throughout the winter—for the first time in many years. Occasionally, he would notice some minor downward shifts in his energy and mood as compared with his “summer self,” but those shifts were manageable—and nothing like the “flatness” and depression he had endured in other winters. I did ask Larry to return the following fall, before the winter settled in, so that we might work preventively.

The following year, I gave Larry the remedy *Sepia* 200c again in the fall—and he was able to sidestep the whole SAD chapter.

Get help, don't settle for less

So I say, don't settle for feeling down for several months a year, chalking it up to “winter blues.” Understand that seasonal affective disorder is a real ailment and that homeopathy, along with other treatments, can be very helpful.

* Nolen-Hoeksema, Susan. *Abnormal Psychology*, 6th ed., 2014. ISBN 978-1-259-06072-4. Retrieved from the Internet 11/6/15

** Homeopathic *materia medica*, according to Boericke, Clarke, and Vermeulen.

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Amy Rothenberg, ND, practices in Connecticut www.nhcmcd.com, blogs for Huffington Post www.huffingtonpost.com/amy-rothenberg-nd/, and authored *The A Cappella Singer Who Lost Her Voice & Other Stories From Natural Medicine* www.amyrothenberg.com. She is a founder and instructor at

New England School of Homeopathy www.nesh.com (new classes begin in San Diego in February and Boston in October 2016); board member, American Association of Naturopathic Physicians; and president, Massachusetts Society of Naturopathic Doctors. She raised three wonderful children with husband, Paul Herscu, ND, MPH, and enjoys gardening, making art, and ballroom dancing.

Winter Doldrums Got You Down?

Five favorite remedies

by MIRANDA CASTRO, FSHom, CCH, RSHom(NA)

Many homeopathic remedies have symptom profiles that could be related to seasonal affective disorder (SAD)—being affected by the light and especially the lack of light in winter months.

Self-prescribing is not recommended for chronic SAD that recurs year after year. This kind of more serious depression needs the expertise of a homeopath to piece together all the parts of a person's history to find the remedy that matches best.

You can treat an acute episode of SAD—one that comes on after an unusually long period without sunshine. If you do find a good remedy match, then take it in the 30c potency, three times daily for two days. If it doesn't work, then you need the advice of a homeopathic practitioner. Here are some of my favorite remedies that can address SAD.

1. *Ammonium carbonicum* is for chilly individuals who are very much affected by the dull, cloudy weather of winter—they become apathetic and unmotivated, not wanting to work or do anything. They eat themselves silly—craving lots of sweet things (especially candies which give them toothaches)—and they put on lots of weight.

2. *Aurum metallicum* is for those who sink into terrible depression in the dark of the winter, feeling like the cloud is sitting over them. At their worst they feel that life isn't worth living. They take solace in work and/or religion and hide themselves away listening to sad music until the sun returns the following spring.

3. *Phosphorus* Those who benefit from this remedy have a really close relationship with the weather, loving the sun and sparkling with it—actually feeling invigorated by being out in the sunshine. They are deeply affected by cloudy weather—becoming miserable and gloomy the longer the sun stays away. In the deepest, darkest time of the winter they can slow right down, not wanting to do anything. Chocolate (especially chocolate ice cream) is their great source of comfort at those times—as are their friends. Even brief outbursts of sunshine on a winter's day will lift their spirits, as can getting out with friends and going to a party or going dancing!

4. *Rhus toxicodendron* is useful for those who are particularly vulnerable to cloudy weather, who find that the cold, damp, wet, and cloudy weather makes them feel just plain miserable. Their body reacts by stiffening up—especially

the back and the joints—which makes them feel even worse. Getting up after sitting or lying down for a while is difficult, and then continued movement eases the stiffness—unfortunately those joints start to hurt again after being used for a while so the person has to rest—after which the whole maddening cycle starts again, thereby causing the restlessness that is a keynote for this remedy.

5. *Sepia* is for extremely chilly types who hate everything about winter: the damp, the rain, the frost, the snow, the clouds—everything. Their moods start to lift when they begin to get warm again in the late spring and early summer when they can get out in the fresh air and do some vigorous exercise. These people love to run much more than jog, and it is this kind of exercise—vigorous exercise in the fresh air—that makes them feel really well overall. If they can't do it, they sink into a depressed, irritable state where they want to be alone (and eventually, so does everyone else—want them to be alone that is!)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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