

Getting Through the Dark Months

Week 2: Treating SAD

“The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommends that SAD should be treated in the same way as other types of depression” (National Health Service Choices, 2013). This may include regulating sleep, light therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, and antidepressants.

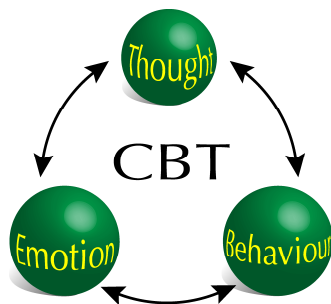


Regulating Sleep

If you want to get the most sunshine out of your day, it is really important to be up during the sunlight hours. **Set a regular sleep schedule** and go to bed earlier so you do not oversleep. Oversleeping and fluctuations in the sleep-wake schedule causes increases in melatonin levels, which can contribute to feelings of depression. Aim to sleep for 7 to 9 hours per night (Armstrong, 2007).

Light Therapy

Light therapy is meant to replace the missing daylight hours with a light box that shines much brighter than ordinary indoor lighting. This encourages your brain to reduce melatonin levels (which makes you sleepy) and increase serotonin levels (which heightens your mood). Research has shown that light therapy **relieves SAD symptoms for 70% of patients after a few weeks of treatment** (National Institute of Health, 2013). Although research suggests a positive short-term effect, there is no strong evidence to support its long-term benefits. Make sure you choose a light box that is medically proven to treat SAD and produced by a certified manufacturer (National Health Service Choices, 2013).



Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

CBT starts with the idea that the **way we think and behave may affect the way we feel**. Changing the way you think about circumstances and how you deal with them can help you feel better. A CBT trained therapist will meet with you over several weeks either through an individual, group, or computer-based program depending on your needs (National Health Service Choices, 2013).

Medication

Antidepressants are sometimes used to treat SAD when the symptoms are severe. **Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)** are the preferred type of antidepressants for SAD. It works by increasing the serotonin levels in your brain, resulting in an **uplifted mood**. Be aware that it can take 4-6 weeks to kick in, should be taken as prescribed and even when you start to feel better, and a common side effect is an upset stomach (National Health Service Choices, 2013).

Armstrong, R. (2007). How to beat the winter blues. *The Independent*.

National Health Service Choices. 2013. Seasonal affective disorder – treatment. Retrieved from www.nhs.uk

National Institute of Health. 2013. Beat the winter blues: Shedding light on seasonal sadness.