



Understanding Seasonal Depression

A Guide for Kids, Teens, and Adults

Jennifer L. L'Heureux, Ph.D.

Core Definition: Seasonal Affective Disorder

- › A form of clinical depression that triggers and resolves the same times every year.
- › Winter-Onset: Usually begins in late fall and resolves in the spring.
- › The Biological “Why”: Shifting seasons disrupt our biological clocks or circadian rhythms.

Additional Non-Biological Potential Precursors

- › Prior existing mental health issues.
- › Contextual reasons: Inflation, unemployment, pressure to act and feel like the holidays must be perfect, housing insecurity, food insecurity, substance disorders, and more.
- › Pause and think about who this may be sounding like to you.

How SAD Looks in Kids Versus Adults

› Attribute

Adults

Kids and Teens

Primary Mood

Persistent sadness, empty mood, feeling heavy.

Highly irritable, sudden tantrums, crying.

Social Patterns

Complete social withdraw, avoiding friends.

Dropping out of activities, avoiding play and friends.

Energy & Sleep

Severe fatigue, oversleep, hard to wake up.

Low energy, morning struggles, sudden daytime naps.

School/Work

Difficulty making decisions, or concentrating.

Dropping grades, school refusal, low-self esteem.

Detailed Symptoms: The Fall and Winter Blues

- › Energy Drain: Feeling very exhausted despite more sleep.
- › Dietary Changes: Strong cravings for carbs and comfort foods. Often leads to weight gain. Think about what type of food also become more readily available because of the holidays...
- › Loss of Joy: Anhedonia, no longer enjoying hobbies, sports, or socializing.
- › Physical Weight: Feeling like arms and legs are just like lead.

How Parents and Teachers Can Help Kids

- › Spot the Shifts: Watch for sudden changes and declines.
- › Validate, Don't Dismiss: Avoid saying things like "you're just being lazy" and instead say something like "I've noticed you seem more tired lately. Let's figure this out together."
- › Keep Routines Steady: Build consistent schedules and bed and wake up times.
- › Prioritize Outdoor Time: Encourage outdoor activities, walks, etc.

Actionable Action Steps for Adults

- › Bright Light Therapy for 20-30 minutes every morning.
- › Maximize Daylight: Open curtains and blinds, sit near windows.
- › Physical Movement: Exercise daily, brief walks in or outdoors matter and can elevate moods.
- › Nutrition Check: Track balanced eating and consult your doctor about vitamins and supplements.

When to Seek Professional Support

- › Persisting problems, intrusive thoughts.
- › CBT or other forms of therapeutic techniques.
- › Temporary prescription options like SSRIs to rebalance serotonin.

Additional Resources

- › <https://childmind.org/guide/quick-guide-to-seasonal-affective-disorder-sad/>
- › <https://www.publichealthdegrees.org/resources/79-resources-managing-seasonal-affective-disorder/>
- › <https://www.childrensmercy.org/parent-ish/2023/10/saddaylight-saving-time/>
- › <https://healthcare.utah.edu/the-scope/kids-zone/all/2024/11/helping-kids-cope-seasonal-affective-disorder>

More Resources

- › <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/seasonal-affective-disorder>
- › <https://www.publichealthdegrees.org/resources/79-resources-managing-seasonal-affective-disorder/>
- › <https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/steps-combat-seasonal-affective-disorder-sad-and>
- › <https://www.samhsa.gov/blog/more-winter-blues-understanding-seasonal-affective-disorder>



Questions???

› Jennifer.LHeureux@dmh.mo.gov