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What Is SAD? Causes, Warning Signs & How to Be There for Someone

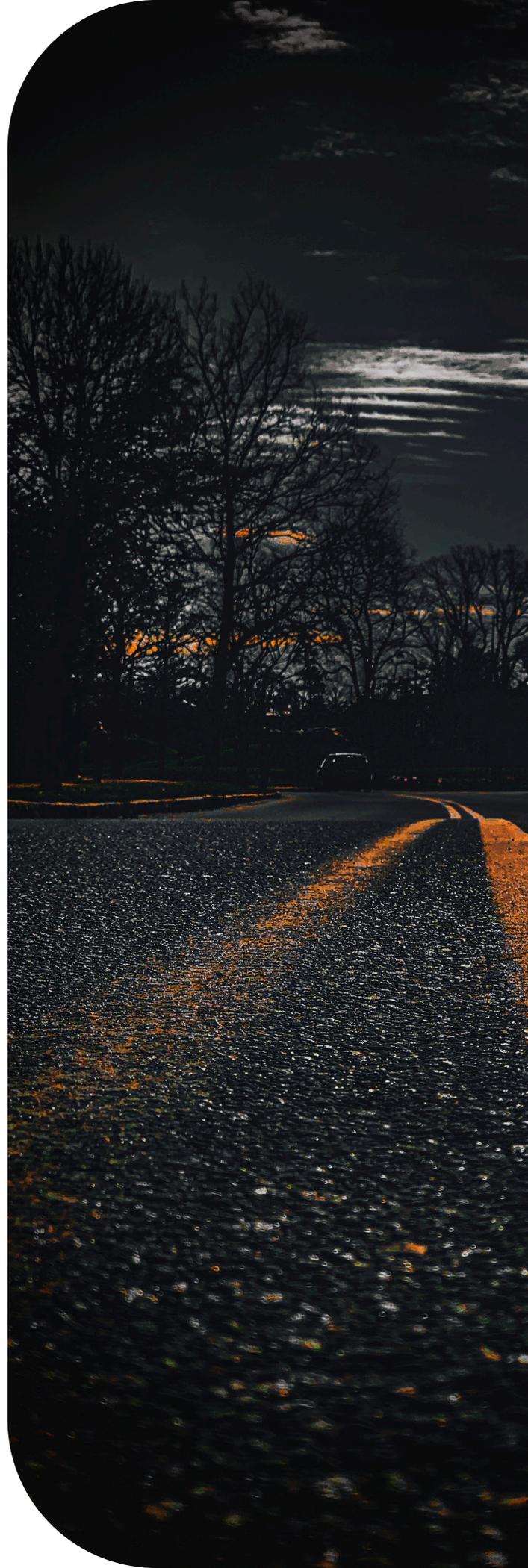


Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a form of seasonal depression that typically appears during the autumn and winter months, when daylight hours are shorter. For this reason, it's often called winter depression.

Around 1 in 15 people in the UK experience symptoms of SAD between September and April, so someone you know may be affected. The good news is that recognising the signs and knowing how to support them can make everyday life feel brighter throughout the year — even on the cloudiest days.

What Is Seasonal Affective Disorder?

Seasonal Affective Disorder is a type of depression that follows a predictable seasonal pattern. Symptoms usually worsen in the darker months and improve when spring and summer bring more natural daylight.





What causes SAD?

SAD is linked to reduced sunlight exposure, which disrupts several natural processes in the body:

1. Overproduction of melatonin

Melatonin is the sleep hormone. In winter, some people produce too much of it, leading to increased tiredness and low energy.

2. Lower serotonin levels

This brain chemical affects mood, appetite and sleep, with links to feelings of depression. A drop in serotonin can therefore throw these out of kilter.

3. Changes in internal body clock

We rely on daylight to regulate our body clock. Shorter days can throw this rhythm off balance, contributing to SAD symptoms.



Signs and Symptoms of SAD

It's normal to feel a little sluggish during winter, but if someone you know is acting out of character, they may be experiencing SAD. For around 3% of people, symptoms can significantly impact daily life.

Look out for:

1. Persistent low mood

They may appear irritable, anxious or withdrawn. Conversations feel strained, and they might seem quieter or snappier than usual.

2. Avoiding social situations

Someone who normally enjoys going out may decline invitations or prefer staying indoors.

3. Heightened emotions

They may cry more easily, show frustration or use negative language expressing feelings such as hopelessness or guilt.

4. Loss of interest

Hobbies and activities they once enjoyed may no longer appeal. Their libido may also decline.

5. Low energy and fatigue

They may struggle to get up in the morning and feel sleepy or drained throughout the day.

6. Increased appetite and cravings

Comfort foods, especially carbohydrates and sweets, may become more tempting. This can lead to winter weight gain.

Key difference:

People with SAD often sleep more and eat more, while those with non-seasonal depression may do the opposite.

It's important to remember that the severity of SAD varies from person to person.

How to Support Someone You Know With Seasonal Affective Disorder

There are many small, meaningful steps you can take to help someone you know who is experiencing SAD.

1. Encourage balanced, mood-boosting meals

Prepare or recommend meals rich in vitamins, lean proteins and complex carbohydrates that support serotonin, such as oatmeal, omelettes, lean chicken, nuts and popcorn.

Limit caffeine where possible — it can heighten anxiety and disrupt sleep.

2. Remind them to stay hydrated

Drinking enough water helps prevent fatigue and headaches, which can worsen low mood.

3. Help them get more daylight

Daylight helps reset the body clock and boosts mood. Try suggesting:

- A lunchtime walk
- Outdoor weekend plans
- Sitting near windows during the day
- If you're nearby, join them — even a 20-minute walk helps.

4. Suggest regular, gentle exercise

Movement increases endorphins and improves energy levels. This might include:

- Walking or cycling to work
- Home workouts
- A weekend hike
- Even housework

Any activity that raises the heart rate can make a difference.

5. Plan things for them to look forward to

Having enjoyable activities ahead can boost positivity. You might suggest:

- A concert or comedy night
- A day trip
- A short break somewhere sunnier
- A cosy meal out

Choose options that feel manageable and uplifting.

6. Talk openly and look for triggers

Ask how they're feeling in a gentle, non-judgmental way. If they seem irritable, stay patient. Over time, you might spot patterns that help you both manage tough moments more effectively.

7. Encourage a healthy sleep routine

A structured bedtime routine is essential when sunlight is limited.

Help them by suggesting:

- A calm, dark and tidy sleep environment
- Reduced screen time before bed
- Avoiding caffeine later in the day
- A relaxing wind-down routine such as reading or a warm bath

8. Make their environment brighter

Help them maximise exposure to natural light:

- Keep curtains and blinds open
- Encourage sitting near windows
- Keep rooms bright and uncluttered

Light therapy boxes (10,000 lux) can reduce symptoms for up to 80% of people, often within 3–4 days.

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