

How to Recognize Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) & What You Can Do About It

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that is triggered by seasonal changes, particularly the change from autumn to winter. Also known as seasonal depression, SAD can affect many areas of life, ranging from sleep & energy levels to relationships & self-worth. Those affected by SAD may seem like completely different people when compared to their personality during the summer months.

If you are concerned that your child is affected by SAD, you should check for these common symptoms. What will separate some of these symptoms from regular teenage behavior is if the teen is experiencing these symptoms with greater intensity or only during the winter months.

Common Symptoms of Season Affective Disorder (SAD)

- *Depressed mood, low self-esteem*
- *Loss of interest or pleasure in activities they regularly enjoy*
- *Appetite & weight changes*
- *Angry, irritable, stressed, or anxious*
- *Unexplained aches & pains*
- *Difficulty concentrating*
- *Sleeping more than usual, yet still feeling tired*
- *Heavy “leaden” feeling in the arms & legs*
- *Feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and despair*
- *Dread or anxiety over the holidays*

Seasonal Affective Disorder is a cyclical disorder that typically begins mildly in autumn, worsens in winter, and gets better in spring/summer. To be clinically diagnosed with Seasonal Affective Disorder, the affected person must have experienced this cycle for two or more consecutive years. If you believe this applies to your teen, call your family doctor to have your child evaluated

However, if your teenager is displaying some or all of these symptoms, it is best to address the issue right away. Here are a few ways you can combat SAD on your own and with help from the church.

What You Can Do About Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

- *Get As Much Natural Sunlight As Possible*

Whenever possible, get your teenager outside during daylight hours and exposed to the sun without wearing sunglasses. You can take short walks outdoors or even open up the blinds in your house to increase natural light inside.

- *Exercise Regularly*

It's no secret that regular exercise has neurological and emotional benefits. Regular exercise can boost serotonin, endorphins, and other feel-good brain chemicals. Exercise can also improve sleep and boost self-esteem. Have your teenager join you for 30 to 60 minutes of activity such as walking a dog, going for a hike, or lifting weights.

- *Eat Healthy*

One of the main symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a desire for sugary and carbohydrate-rich food such as pasta, white-bread, and candy. Instead of providing these simple carbohydrates, offer healthier foods such as oily fish, walnuts, oatmeal, whole grain bread, and bananas.

- *Make Time for Fun*

Stress is known to worsen or even trigger depression. Take time to schedule fun time with your teenager. Whether it's painting, coloring, tossing around a football, or encouraging them to hang out with their friends, you will need to make an intentional effort to schedule time for fun.

- *Reach Out to Church Staff*

The church exists to help others during their darkest times. For a teenager suffering from SAD, this may feel like one of the darkest seasons in their life. Getting your teenager involved in student ministry activities, such as Fusion on Sunday nights, can help your teenager find a safe place to share their thoughts and feelings with their peers while being directed towards Christ. If you feel that one-on-one conversations would be helpful, reach out to Joe Pantaleo, the Director of Student Ministry, via email (joe@staffordcrossing.org) to schedule time for your teenager to talk with him.

Extra Resources

- Books
 - *“Five Keys to Dealing With Depression”* by Gregory Jantz
 - *“What Do I Do When Teenagers Are Depressed And Contemplate Suicide”* by Dr. Steven Gerali
 - *“When the Darkness Will Not Lift: Doing What We Can While We Wait for God and Joy”* by John Piper
- Online Resources
 - National Institute of Mental Health - <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/seasonal-affective-disorder/index.shtml>
 - Psycom.net - <https://www.psycom.net/depression.central.seasonal.html>

