



THE EAP CONNECTION

Coping with Seasonal Affective Disorder During COVID-19

With colder temperatures, less daylight hours, and increased stress and social isolation due to COVID-19, people are more at risk for experiencing Seasonal Affective Disorder (a.k.a. the winter blues) than in past years. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that typically occurs during fall and winter months, in which cold weather and lack of sunlight seem to be triggering factors. SAD affects about 5% of U.S. adults every year.¹

Some common symptoms of SAD include loss of interest or pleasure in things usually enjoyed; fatigue; concentration problems; sleep problems; weight gain; feelings of sluggishness or restlessness; irritability; and a sense of helplessness or hopelessness. While symptoms typically occur during fall and winter months, January and February are often the most difficult.¹

Fortunately, there are things that you can do to help lessen the effects of seasonal depression, and these same strategies can also help with isolation and anxiety related to COVID-19. Developing a toolkit for yourself can help you feel happier and more connected this winter.

Be active: Include physical activity in your schedule as often as possible. Exercise can boost your mood and has been shown to reduce and prevent depression. Trying out new or different types of movement (such as yoga, HIIT workouts, dance, or core programs) keeps things interesting and helps with motivation. Additionally, if you can get outside during the daytime, you'll benefit from the increased exposure to sunlight.

Stay connected: Participating in social activities can help ease the symptoms of SAD. While virtual connections probably don't feel as engaging as in-person activities, there are still many benefits to getting together with others through video or phone calls. Social withdrawal and isolation are closely related to SAD; making an effort to connect helps overcome these. If there are ways you can join in outdoor winter activities with your family and friends, do so safely and creatively.

Engage in self-care: Maintaining a daily routine, eating healthy foods, getting enough sleep, regularly exercising, and doing relaxing activities are great ways to take care of yourself and boost your mood. Remember, taking time for yourself isn't selfish, it's essential to your well-being. Everyone is unique when it comes to self-care, so explore what works best for you.

Light therapy: Any exposure to sunlight is helpful with SAD. If you can get some rays while you have morning coffee or go for a quick walk over the lunch hour, the sunshine may help you feel more alert and improve your mood. If getting natural sunlight is difficult, you may want to consider a light box, an artificial light source that mimics the effects of the sun, to help increase your exposure time. You could talk with a counselor or your doctor about the benefits and uses to determine if it's a good fit for you.

Talk to a Professional: If you are using the above strategies and continuing to struggle, it may be helpful to talk to a counselor or your doctor about additional strategies or coping methods that could be helpful. Reach out to your EAP at 1-800-222-8590 as a starting place to get connected.

1. Lindberg, S. (2020, November 27). *Covid-19 and seasonal affective disorder: How this year is different*. Verywell Mind. Retrieved from <https://www.verywellmind.com/how-covid-19-affects-seasonal-affective-disorder-5081954>.

2. Clark, K. (2020, December 30). *How to cope with COVID anxiety and seasonal depression*. Hackensack Meridian Health. Retrieved from <https://www.hackensackmeridianhealth.org/HealthU/2020/12/30/how-to-cope-with-covid-anxiety-and-seasonal-depression/>.

HOW TO USE YOUR EAP BENEFIT:

ERC: Counselors & Consultants is your company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) partner. For additional information, visit our website ERCincorp.com or call 1-800-222-8590.