



Western Pennsylvania Guide to Good Health

Health News You and Your Family Can Use



Mental Health

SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER (SAD): *It's Not Just the Winter Blues*

By Judith Gusky

Here we are once again. Facing another winter season in Pittsburgh. Last year hit hard. Predictions for this winter are no better. Pittsburgh isn't known for its sunny days. On average, Pittsburgh reports 59 days of bright sunshine each year. Adding "partly sunny" days, the number is still less than half.

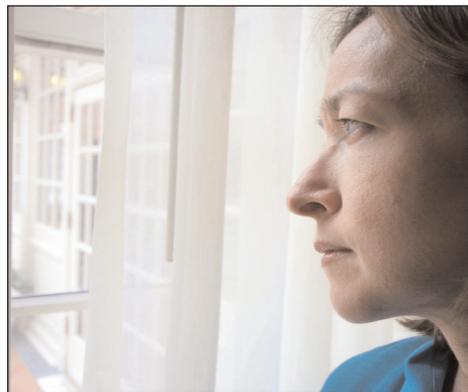
Why should we care? Because lack of adequate sunshine can be bad for your mental health.

A 2013 University of Pittsburgh study predicted that Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) impacts about 750,000 people in the Pittsburgh metro area.

What is SAD? Think about jet lag and you've got the idea. Only SAD lasts a lot longer and depressive symptoms can impair daily functioning. The cold, dark months that begin in late October and last until March can take a toll on energy level, mood, sleep, diet, and productivity.

IT'S ALL ABOUT LIGHT

Like all living things we function according to the cycle of daylight and darkness (circadian rhythm) or environmental time. But as seasons change so does the amount and duration of sunlight each day. Most of us can adapt (without hibernating), but not all of us are so lucky.



Why is this so? In part, it has to do with our internal biological clocks.

Humans have a "master clock" within the brain. It runs on a daily cycle of roughly 24 hours (how lucky), but not precisely 24 hours (actually 24.5 hours). It regulates sleep, digestive, and hormonal cycles and more. The problem is that as winter approaches and days get shorter, our internal clocks can get out of sync with external time.

TREATING SAD

If you have SAD, you probably dread the winter months. Unfortunately, without proactive intervention it's unlikely that this season will be any different from last.

So what can you do? Consider diet and exercise. Carbohydrate craving and low energy go hand-in-hand with SAD. Plan outdoor activities especially on bright

sunny winter days. Consult with your doctor about medication or herbal supplements. Think about counseling, even group therapy for SAD sufferers.

LIGHT THERAPY

Light therapy is the number one treatment for SAD.

What do you need to know? First, in order to trigger our internal master clock, light has to enter through the eyes (no tanning). Second, light therapy fixtures must meet manufacturer's specifications of 10,000 lux (illumination) and filter out dangerous ultraviolet light (UV).

Third, when using your light therapy product keep your eyes open but don't stare into the light. Check proper angle and distance. Use your light box in the morning and consistently at the same time each day. Fifteen to thirty minutes is often more than adequate.

Guidelines differ for bipolar disorder and other sleep and anxiety disorders. Consult with your doctor or therapist before starting light therapy. Some insurances cover light therapy products. Check first before you buy.



For more information, call **Pittsburgh Integrative Mental Health** at (412) 687-1234 or visit www.pimhservices.com.

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