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There is help for those who suffer with sadness during the shorter, darker days

DR. STEPHEN BUIE • GUEST COLUMNIST • NOVEMBER 16, 2010

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With longer nights and shorter days upon us, some people experience a similar descent in their mood. As darkness descends early, energy declines, outlook darkens, and days drag on without joy as well as light. American writer William Styron called it “darkness visible.”

It becomes more difficult to get out of bed in the mornings and to drag oneself through the day. As the days lengthen and the sun brightens, mood lifts, and with it returns the capacity to enjoy life. As spring blooms around them life and energy return.

This is the experience of one who is affected by seasonal affective disorder, a condition that leads to depression in the late fall and winter with resolution of those symptoms in late winter and spring. Studies suggest that up to 9 percent of the population is affected by SAD at some point in their lives. A smaller percent experience it on an annual basis.

The farther north you live, the more susceptible you are to developing symptoms. The condition in some cases is inherited and in others the cause is unknown, although abnormalities in serotonin regulation are suspected. SAD is often not diagnosed, because for the person experiencing it they have come to see it as a usual life experience: “Of course I get down in the winter, doesn't everybody?”

Who is affected by SAD

SAD is considered a variant of depressive disorders in general. Some patients with bipolar disorder have a seasonal component to their mood swings. There can also be a pattern of seasonal alcohol abuse, which may be an effort to self-medicate the depressive symptoms. Alcohol, as a depressant, may numb the person to their depression over the short term but often expressed the depressive symptoms as well as adding the problems associated with alcohol abuse.



Dr. Stephen Buie (Special to the

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People with SAD seek out medical care for a variety of physical ailments more often than those not affected, so undiagnosed SAD increases overall medical costs for those suffering from it.

Treatment of SAD

SAD can be treated with light therapy or antidepressant medications. Light therapy uses a light therapy box specifically designed for treatment of SAD. The usual recommended "dose" of light is 5,000 lux (a unit of illumination) per day. That is a 30-minute exposure to a 10,000 Lux light each day.

Light therapy boxes come in a variety of designs. A recent innovation is a box using blue light that more intensively stimulates the brain so that the exposure time can be cut in half.

Antidepressants are also an effective treatment for SAD. Antidepressant therapy for SAD can often be limited to the winter months when symptoms occur.

Stephen Buie, M.D. practices psychiatry at The Pisgah Institute. He is immediate past president of the N.C. Psychiatric Association and next year will be Chair of the Buncombe County Medical Society Foundation Board. His clinical interests are the treatment of mood and anxiety disorders in adults.

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