



Welcome to MHALC and let us know how we can be helpful to you! Please feel free to call me at 740-788-0302, or send an email to paddykutz@alink.com.

Seasonal Affective Disorder

by Paddy Kutz, Executive Director
Mental Health America of Licking County
December 2012

Seasonal affective disorder is a form of depression with symptoms that occur during the winter months, usually going into remission during the spring and summer. Although it was first noted before 1845, it has only received wide public attention in the last two decades or so.

Causes – it has long been known that sunlight, as it peaks and ebbs over the year, affects many animals’ seasonal activities, such as hibernation or reproductive cycles. Apparently, humans are no exception.

Researchers have tied SAD to melatonin, a sleep-related hormone that the human pineal gland produces and releases in the dark. Production of the hormone seems particularly active during winter, when the days are shorter and darker.

Very bright light blocks the release of melatonin in people – and can relieve the effects of winter depression or SAD. People generally respond to bright light therapy within 4 days of starting treatment – relapsing within 4 days after stopping light therapy. Taking a walk outside or at the mall can be helpful. Physical exercise can change the brain chemistry in a positive way and, of course, is free. Some people may need an antidepressant medication prescribed by a doctor as well.

For most people with SAD, January and February are the worst months.

Symptoms – the symptoms are rather specific to avoid misdiagnosis for other depressive disorders:

- Regularly occurring symptoms of depression (sad, anxious or “empty” moods; decreased energy and interest in things once enjoyed, etc.) during the fall/winter months of at least 3 different years – 2 of them consecutively;
- At least 3 times as many instances of depression within a two-month time frame as during other times of the year;
- No other factors that could account for regular changes of mood (become unemployed every winter etc.)
- Excessive eating and sleeping; weight gain.

Treatment – Phototherapy (light treatment) has been effective in relieving SAD. Most people also benefit from talk therapy with a counselor and regular exercise.

Call me at 788-0302 or by email: paddykutz@alink.com