Seasonal Affective Disorder

“It is during our darkest moments that we must focus to see the light.” — Aristotle Onassis

With shorter days, less sunlight and colder weather, which lead most people to spend more time indoors, fall and winter are times when people may notice that their mood changes. Changes in mood can be related to many factors including stress, a major life transition, poor sleep and medication side effects, just to name a few. But if you notice that your mood tends to tip when the seasons change, don’t brush it off. You may have a type of depression called seasonal affective disorder (SAD).

You are not alone. The National Institutes of Health reports that millions of Americans may have SAD but do not realize it. The disorder is more common among people who have major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), an eating disorder or an anxiety disorder. Symptoms of SAD include: increased sleep, loss of interest in activities, social withdrawal, fatigue, trouble thinking clearly and increased appetite, especially for sweets and carbohydrates. These symptoms typically intensify and then diminish at about the same time every year, as the weather changes.

If you or someone you know may have seasonal affective disorder, talk to your doctor, who may then refer you to a mental health professional. There are several effective treatments for SAD, including the following.

Exposure to sunlight: Spending time outdoors can help ease symptoms. Since we derive much of our vitamin D from sunlight, it may also be helpful to talk to your doctor about having your vitamin D levels checked to determine if supplements would be helpful.

Light therapy: If obtaining natural sunlight is not possible, consider using a light box. Ideally, you should sit in front of a very bright light box (10,000 lux) every day for 30 to 45 minutes, usually first thing in the morning, from fall to spring.

Psychotherapy: Therapy may improve your perception of yourself and your environment, and it may enhance your coping and interpersonal skills. It can also help you identify what causes stress for you and learn how to manage stress more effectively.

Self-Care: Give yourself permission to seek support, exercise regularly and eat well-balanced meals, spend time with others, and be patient with yourself, as you learn how to manage your mood with the seasons.