Seasonal Affective Disorder and Kids

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) doesn't just affect adults. It strikes children and teenagers, too.

As the days get shorter and temperatures dip, some people experience the winter blues. During the winter, some people are vulnerable to depression, fatigue, an increased need for sleep, and difficulty concentrating. These are a few symptoms of winter SAD.

SAD is a form of major depression that occurs during fall and winter, when people react adversely to the decrease in sunlight and colder temperatures. SAD can also hit people during the spring and summer.

It can be difficult to diagnose SAD in children and teens, says Dr. J. David Bragg, program director for Clinical Mental Health Counseling at South University — Virginia Beach. SAD symptoms range from mild to severe depending on the child.

“As with all mood disorders, SAD is more difficult to diagnose in children because the pattern of symptomatology is different than in adults,” he says.

“Depressed mood in children may be exemplified by irritability and fatigue.”

The normal fluctuations in mood seen in children may mask the presence of depression, Bragg says.

They seem to be aware that something is amiss, but they may blame their feelings on external factors.

“The vagaries of childhood and adolescence with the attendant emotional upheaval tend to make many diagnoses difficult,” he says. “Some symptoms are misinterpreted as the onset of puberty.”

Symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder in Children and Teens

Dr. Norman E. Rosenthal, a SAD specialist and author, writes in his book “Winter Blues: Everything You Need to Know to Beat Seasonal Affective Disorder,” that SAD affects about 3% of children ages 9 to 17. He says problems with concentration, schoolwork, energy, and mood are often signs of SAD in young people.

Children and adolescents might feel bad, but don’t know why, Bragg says.

“They seem to be aware that something is amiss, but they may blame their feelings on external factors, for example, peers are being mean,” he says.

“Secondary effects of SAD include a decline in academic achievement, loss of desire to take part in social activities and sports, memory impairment, lack of organization, and difficulty in writing, all of which affect self-concept and self-esteem.”

http://cmsdeploy.content.edmc.edu/assets/marketing/Insite/southsource_in-text_SAD.jpg

Other symptoms of winter SAD can include:

• Irritable mood
• Changes in appetite, or craving junk foods more than usual
• Insomnia or hypersomnia
• Throwing temper tantrums
• Not wanting to do chores they didn’t have a problem doing before
• Experiencing physical ailments, such as headaches or stomach pain

Treatment
According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, nearly 5% of children and adolescents in the general population suffer from depression at any given point in time. Early recognition and intervention by parents, teachers, and clinicians are essential in helping treat children and teens suffering from depression. For help, parents are advised to ask their physician to refer them to a qualified mental health professional who can diagnose and treat SAD in children and teenagers.

Light therapy is an effective method of treatment for SAD. A light therapy box mimics outdoor light and is believed to cause a chemical change in the brain that eases the symptoms of SAD. A light therapy box may be used on its own, or combined with other SAD treatments such as antidepressant medications or counseling.

"While light therapy is effective for SAD, other treatment options should be considered," Bragg says. "The use of psychotropic medication and traditional psychotherapy should address the somatic and psychosocial issues prevalent in SAD."

The KidsHealth website of children's health organization Nemours is a source of information about the health, behavior, and development of children and teens. The site offers tips on how parents and caregivers can also help their children cope with SAD:

• Ask the doctor how to best help your child.
• Learn more about SAD and provide simple explanations to your child about the condition.
• Encourage your child to exercise and spend time outdoors. Parents should increase the amount of sunlight their children are exposed to whenever possible.
• Spend quality time with your child.
• Be patient and don’t expect symptoms to go away immediately.
• Help your child organize and complete their homework.
• Encourage your child to eat healthy and avoid junk food.
• Encourage your child to stick to a regular bedtime every day so they can get adequate rest.