

SO SAD

I figured it would be another long winter. It was only January and my “seasonal symptoms” had already been bothering me for a month. I was feeling tired. By 3:00 p.m. I could barely function at work. And I was extra hungry all the time, and craved good old “comfort foods”. My zippered skirts and slacks told me I had gained weight. I wanted to sleep all the time, and had no particular wish to visit with anyone. Nothing seemed very worthwhile.

This is not my usual view of the world. During the spring and sunny summer months I am filled with energy, have no trouble maintaining my weight and enjoy being sociable with people. So what was it that seemed to happen to me each year during the late fall and winter?

As I was overdue for my flu shot, and planned to visit my doctor anyway, I decided to share with her how I was feeling. After a little probing into my symptoms and their seasonal appearance, she suggested that I may have a disorder known as SAD – Seasonal Affective Disorder. Along with my symptoms, I fit the picture in another way too. I was female, and four times more women than men experience this.

My immediate questions for my doctor were, “What causes it?” and “What can I do about it?” Luckily, she had answers for both. “Researchers”, she told me, “have tied SAD to a sleep-related hormone called melatonin. This hormone is produced and released in the dark, from the human pineal gland, and this seems to happen to a greater degree during the winter, when the days are shorter and darker.” As for what I could do about it, there were some pretty concrete answers. There are antidepressant medications, which are standard treatment for depression in general; there is photo therapy or “light therapy”; and there is a combination of the two. My doctor explained that a “light box” can be rented or purchased for use at home: it is not something you build for yourself! Many find light therapy has the best effect when used first thing in the morning soon after waking. Most will note improvement quite quickly, often by the third day, and usually by the end of one week. As there are some who don’t respond to light therapy, so rental of a light box might be a good way to go, with purchase if it makes a difference. My doctor and I agreed I would try this for a few weeks. If my depressed feelings continued to be unacceptable to me, we would then discuss starting on a medication, as well as exploring other supports such as counseling or self-help groups.

How am I doing now? So far, I seem to be one who can benefit from light therapy. It is great to have some of my old energy back. If you can see yourself in some of my story, talk with your doctor. So often there is an answer for things we simply put up with.

To find out more about Seasonal Affective Disorder, consult your health care provider, the internet, library or a mental health organization.

This article was written by Janet Fowler, a retired public health nurse, who shared the story of a personal friend. It was originally published in 2001 and received positive responses for bringing this common issue out in the open.

The “Open Mind” column is sponsored by individuals and organizations concerned with mental health issues in rural Wellington and Dufferin counties. Contact Canadian Mental Health Association at 519-766-4450 ext. 231 or parkinsons@cmhagrb.on.ca. For access to all Open Mind columns and local mental health resources/information, visit www.cmhagrb.on.ca or www.communitytorchlight.com