Helping Your Student Get Through Seasonal Depression

The colder season is here, and that means snow, holidays and SAD—winter-onset Seasonal Affective Disorder. This seasonal form of depression affects many adults every year, but it can hit college-age students particularly hard because of the stresses already associated with college life.

Whether your child is a freshman or an older student, as we head into second semester, it’s important to tune in to their mental health and understand how to help them if they appear to be struggling.

What Is SAD?

Sometimes referred to as the winter blues, Seasonal Affective Disorder often accompanies the cold winter months and lack of sun. Days get shorter, nights get longer and these changes can have negative impacts on both physiological and mental health.

SAD can be particularly troublesome for young people like college students, many of whom are just starting to experience life on their own and exploring the limits of their independence. Instead of getting up early and having a regular routine like they did in high school, they often stay up late to study (or socialize!) and sleep in if they don’t have a morning class. This can make it harder to get the vitamin D they need to ward off symptoms of SAD.

While science has not definitively identified the cause of SAD, a variety of biological factors come into play, including:

Circadian rhythm: Your natural biological clock keeps track of the normal cycle of sunlight and darkness, signaling when to feel awake or go to sleep. The reduction in sunlight in winter can throw the body off balance and lead to winter-onset SAD.

Melatonin levels: The additional darkness can also lead to an increased level of melatonin, a hormone that regulates sleep patterns—causing lethargy and sleepiness, which contribute to depression.
Serotonin levels: Less sunlight can mean a decrease in the synapse levels of serotonin, a neurotransmitter involved in mood.

Vitamin deficiency: The sun is our best source of vitamin D, which is also thought to be involved in serotonin levels. Spending less time in natural sunlight can result in vitamin D deficiency.

Common Signs of SAD

The first thing you can do to help your college student manage seasonal depression is to learn how to identify SAD. Common symptoms of SAD are similar to those of generalized depression, such as:

- Low energy and sluggishness
- Insomnia, increased drowsiness or other sleep problems
- Trouble concentrating
- Feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness
- Changes in weight or appetite
- Losing interest in favorite activities
- Sadness on a daily basis
- Social withdrawal
- Certain risk factors make some people more likely to develop SAD, including:
  - Being female
  - Already struggling with bipolar disorder or depression
  - Previous family history of SAD
  - Living in northern latitudes
  - Younger age

If you’re hearing from your student less or seeing their habits change at the start of the winter term, it doesn’t necessarily mean they’re experiencing SAD — but you know your child and their usual way of behaving and communicating, so stay alert for the signs.

Tips for Helping Your Student Get Through Seasonal Depression

Your college student is an independent young adult learning to navigate the world on their own, but if you suspect they’re suffering from SAD, there are practical ways you can help.

1. Encourage them to maintain a regular bedtime.
A lack of sleep is known to worsen the symptoms of general depression and can increase the likelihood of experiencing SAD as well. It can be hard to maintain a regular sleep schedule when college classes have them running around, studying and working at all hours, but try to emphasize the importance of going to bed by a specific time.

If they normally do homework at night, for example, encourage your student to choose a cutoff hour to close the books for good ? like 11 p.m. No one should be up until the early hours working on a research paper or studying for an exam ? not only will that make depression more likely, but it won?t produce quality work. Help your student sleep better by using bedtime accessories like eye masks and earplugs or developing a pre-sleep relaxation routine.

2. Help them create balance.

It's likely that your student is still getting the hang of time management so, if they are open to it, provide advice about how to schedule studying along with other everyday activities. The beginning and end of semesters are often stressful for college students, but routine creates order and helps keep anxiety in check. Help your student create a strategic plan that integrates study time with rest and self-care in order to support their mental health.

3. Remind them to prioritize emotional and physical wellness.

Many of us see winter as a time to shut out the cold and stay cozy indoors ? it's especially tempting for college students in the hours they're not trekking to classes. Hibernating inside, however, could be a factor contributing to your child?s SAD, causing them to forego exercise, say no to social outings and see even less of the limited sunlight.

Hunkering down in their dorm might feel like a natural choice when they're feeling depressed, but keeping up with regular routines could help significantly. Regular exercise and social interactions can counteract the symptoms of SAD and ensure your student stays mentally and physically healthy.

If they still need more help, suggest daily light therapy as an alternative to medication ? consider shipping them an inexpensive light therapy box. Just 20 minutes to an hour of light exposure each day can have a positive effect.

4. Visit on-campus health facilities.
If the above strategies don't help and SAD's symptoms begin to interfere with your student's daily life, suggest they take advantage of on-campus mental health support. If their school doesn't have a therapist on staff or isn't able to refer your student to a local specialist, you can help your student contact a professional in their area.

SAD may only happen seasonally, but it's still a form of depression. If the symptoms become too much for your student to handle on their own, it's essential that they seek professional care — whether they just need a safe space to talk or to be connected with other treatment options.

Supporting Your College Student With SAD

The winter days are short and often gray, which means it's the season for SAD. If your college student is dealing with symptoms of seasonal depression, the best thing you can do is let them know you're there for them — no matter how much physical distance may separate you.

Source URL: https://nsfp.unc.edu/news-events/news/helping-your-student-get-through-seasonal-depression