



Charlie Health's Guide to Surviving Seasonal Depression

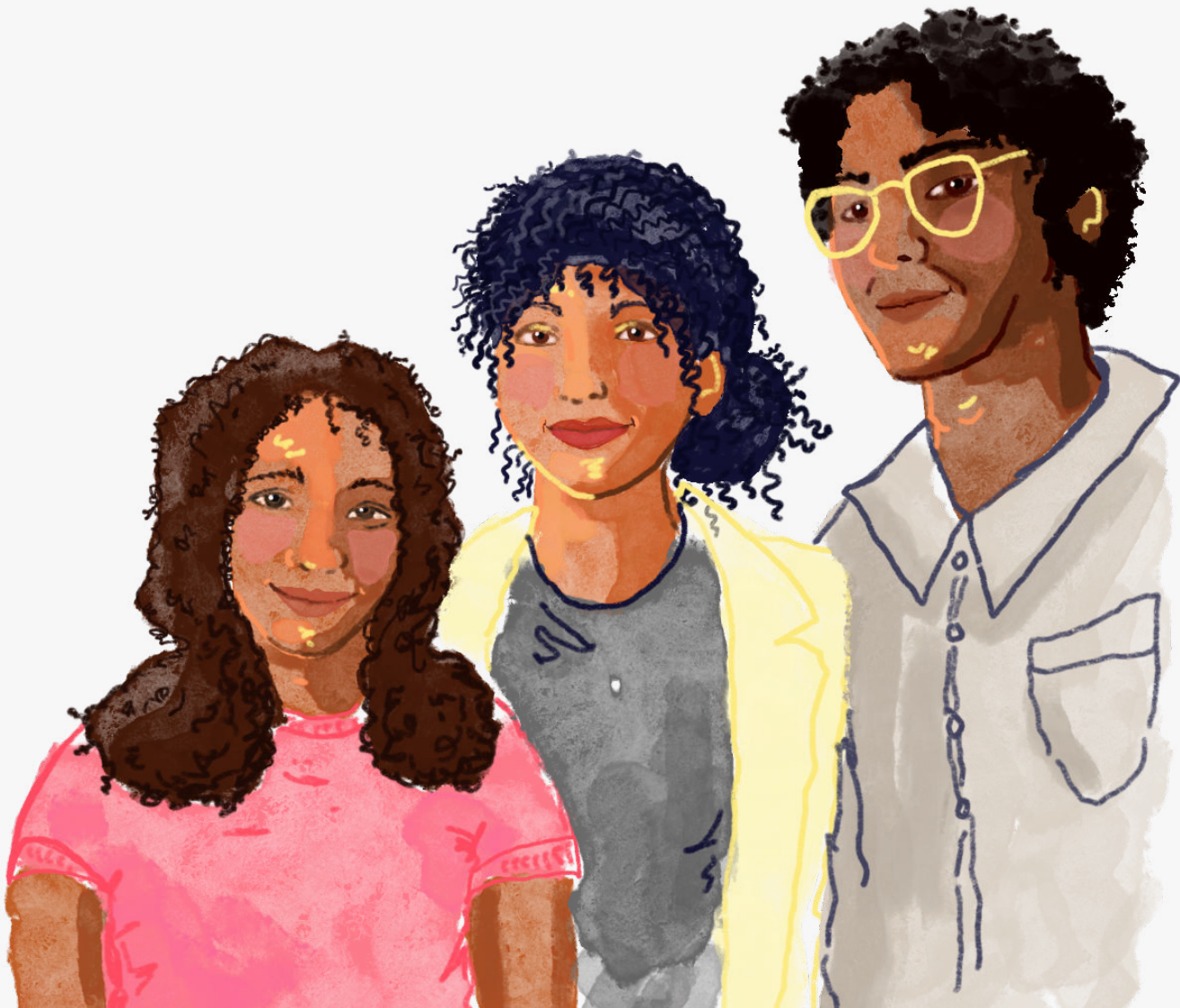


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Letter From the Chief Clinical Officer

To Charlie Health clients and families,

As the days get colder and darker, we know it can be harder to cope with mental health challenges. This is especially true if you're one of the tens of thousands of people in the United States who deal with winter seasonal affective disorder (SAD), also called seasonal depression.

To make this winter a bit easier, I'm excited to share with you Charlie Health's comprehensive guide to seasonal depression. In it, you'll find an overview of what SAD is and how it's treated, tips from Charlie Health therapists for coping with SAD symptoms, and more.

Taking care of yourself is a project for every season, and I hope this guide helps you get through the winter months more easily this year.



Warmly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dr. Caroline Fenkel".

Dr. Caroline Fenkel, DSW, LCSW

Winter Seasonal Affective Disorder 101

What is seasonal affective disorder?

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD), also known as seasonal depression, is a type of depression that people experience for several months during specific seasons. It can cause feelings of sadness, low energy, and general unhappiness. SAD is more common during the fall and winter months when there is less sunlight, but some people may experience symptoms in warmer months.

What causes seasonal affective disorder?

The exact cause of SAD is not fully understood, but it's likely linked to a combination of biological, environmental, and genetic factors. Reduced sun exposure during the fall and winter months can disrupt the body's circadian rhythm (its internal clock) and lead to lower vitamin D levels, triggering SAD symptoms.

Changes in light exposure can also impact mood-regulating neurotransmitters like serotonin and sleep-regulating hormones like melatonin. These disruptions can cause SAD symptoms, such as disruptions in mood and sleep. Also, like many depressive disorders, people may be more likely to develop SAD if a family member has it, too.

What are the symptoms of seasonal affective disorder?

Physical symptoms

- A significant decrease in energy and motivation
- Changes in sleep patterns, including oversleeping or insomnia
- Increased appetite, especially for carbohydrates
- Physical discomfort, including headaches or muscle aches

Mental symptoms

- Persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness
- Trouble focusing and making decisions
- Losing interest in previously enjoyable activities and hobbies
- Irritability and mood swings

SAD symptoms vary from person-to-person in terms of severity. People who are experiencing life-threatening depression or mental health symptoms should contact a local emergency department or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988.

How is seasonal affective disorder treated?

There are several treatments that can be used to manage the symptoms of SAD, including different therapies and lifestyle changes. All of these approaches are incorporated into SAD treatment at Charlie Health, as needed.

1

Therapeutic options

- Light therapy, which involves exposure to bright light that mimics natural sunlight
- Talk therapy, which can provide coping strategies and tools to manage SAD symptoms.

2

Antidepressant medications

- Usually prescribed to people with SAD severe symptoms.

3

Lifestyle changes

- Daily exercises, a balanced diet, vitamin D supplements, and regular sleep can also be a part of SAD treatment.

SAD Facts and Figures

Since SAD is a common global phenomenon, it has been widely studied. Here are some notable facts and figures from SAD research, including data on how many days people report SAD symptoms annually and the percentage of people it affects in the United States.

December & January

The months when SAD symptoms peak for most people

5%

The percentage of adults in the United States who experience SAD

4 out of 5

How many people with SAD are women, though this ratio usually evens out as people age

146

The number of days people usually experience SAD symptoms (about 40% of the year)

20 to 30 years old

The age at which people usually notice SAD symptoms, though many recall symptoms from earlier in life

x7

The likelihood of having SAD if you live in Washington state compared to Florida (SAD is more prevalent in regions farther from the equator)

Winter Blues vs. Seasonal Affective Disorder vs. Depression

Depression is often used colloquially to describe peoples' experience of the changing seasons ("I'm feeling so depressed that the sun is setting at 4 p.m."), but there are different kinds of mood-related conditions that affect people during the fall and winter. Even though SAD, clinical depression, and the "winter blues" are related, it's important to understand the difference between these conditions because they require different kinds of treatment.

Winter blues

The "winter blues" refer to a mild and fairly common condition where people feel a bit sad, tired, and irritable during the fall and winter because of the changing seasons, reduced daylight, and colder weather. These symptoms usually go away when the seasons change and don't meet the criteria for a clinical mental health diagnosis.

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)

Like the winter blues, SAD usually happens in winter, but the symptoms are worse and last longer. SAD symptoms include mood changes, fatigue, and sleep and appetite disruptions that significantly impact day-to-day well-being. Although SAD symptoms go away when the seasons change, this mental health condition is a type of depressive disorder and often requires treatment.

Depression

Clinical depression is a general term used for a serious mental health condition that can occur at any time of the year. Clinical depression may also refer to major depressive disorder (MDD), a common kind of depression. Symptoms include persistent feelings of sadness, loss of interest in activities, changes in appetite and sleep, difficulty concentrating, and even thoughts of self-harm or suicide. Clinical depression can be chronic and require ongoing treatment, including emergency intervention when necessary.

7 Therapist-Approved Tips for Dealing With Seasonal Depression

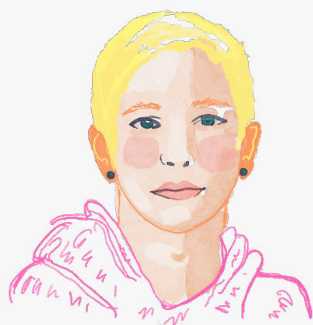
We polled several Charlie Health therapists for their best tips on coping with SAD.

Here, Contemplative Practitioner Joanna Garvin, Clinical Supervisor Tracye Freeman Valentine, and Group Therapist Amy Gillaspie share seven tips for dealing with seasonal depression.



1. Stick to a routine

It may feel tempting to stay inside or cancel plans altogether when it's cold and dark out, but sticking to a routine can stave off feelings of sadness or loneliness. And, as Freeman Valentine points out, incorporating exercise and balanced eating into your routine — such as a daily walk and consistent meals — can help you manage stress levels year-round.



2. Practice mindfulness

Mindfulness practices have been shown to reduce symptoms of depression, according to some studies, making them a promising option for dealing with SAD symptoms. Try spending a few minutes each day on a mindfulness app or, as Garvin recommends, ground yourself by standing outside with bare feet.



3. Keep your space well-lit

Opening curtains and turning on lights can increase your exposure to the less-than-usual amount of sunlight during the winter months, Freeman Valentine points out. For those feeling particularly affected by the lack of light, consider purchasing a light therapy lamp (sometimes called a “SAD lamp” or “happy lamp”).



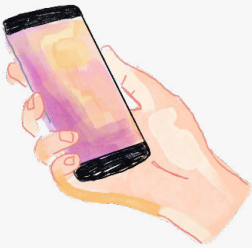
4. Be creative

Whether it's drawing, painting, or crafting, being creative can serve as an outlet for self-expression and offer a small mood boost (or, at the very least, distract you from feeling down). One craft Garvin recommends is painting rocks and leaving them as surprises for others in places like the library or a public park—knowing you've brought someone unexpected joy can help you feel better!



5. Connect with loved ones

Make dinner plans with a friend, grab coffee with a coworker, or exchange check-in texts with a family member. For loved ones who are far away (which can be its own source of sadness, especially during the winter holiday season), Garvin suggests making a remote plan, like scheduling a virtual dinner date or gift exchange.



6. Make fun plans

A tip that Gillaspie follows herself: “Intentionally making new enjoyable memories, associations, and traditions during this time of year has helped me with my own difficulties with SAD,” she says. “Looking forward to the traditions my friends and I have created really helps.”



7. Ask for help

While these tips may help alleviate SAD, they aren't a replacement for professional help. Ultimately, one of the best ways to combat the condition is reaching out to a mental health professional, especially one who is familiar with SAD, says Freeman Valentine.

A Mindfulness Technique for Seasonal Depression

Being mindful, aware, and accepting of the present moment helps you better control your thoughts and emotions instead of them having control over you. This can be particularly helpful when you're dealing with SAD symptoms like irregular mood changes and irritability. Also, research shows that mindfulness practices can reduce overall depression symptoms, including those associated with SAD.

The mindfulness exercise below called “the snowflake observation” encourages you to be fully present in the moment while appreciating the beauty of nature and embracing the cold weather (which may otherwise be a source of sadness or stress). You can recreate this exercise by observing raindrops or falling leaves, too.

Snowflake observation

1. On a day when it is snowing, find a quiet outdoor spot, such as a park or your backyard.
2. Stand or sit comfortably and take a few deep breaths to center yourself.
3. Extend your arm and let a snowflake land on your mitten or glove.
4. Gently observe the snowflake, paying close attention to its intricate, delicate details. Notice its shape, size, and any unique patterns.
5. As the snowflake melts or blows away, be present in that moment and embrace the impermanence of the experience.
6. Repeat this process with another snowflake if you'd like, or simply take a few more mindful breaths and enjoy the winter landscape.

Your Seasonal Depression Self-Care Toolkit

In addition to the tips and exercises above, these are some items that can make it a bit easier to cope with SAD and practice self-care when you're dealing with SAD symptoms.

Light therapy lamp or sunrise alarm clock

A common treatment for SAD designed to mimic sunlight. These types of light can cause your body to release much-needed serotonin during darker and colder months.

Indoor plants

One study found that people who spent 5-10 minutes in a room with a few houseplants felt happier than those in a plant-free room.

Vitamin D supplement

An over-the-counter supplement that may help improve your mood during months with less sunshine.

Ingredients for easy-to-make comfort meals

Wholesome microwavable meals count, too.

Uplifting playlist

Add songs that boost your mood and make you smile

Lavender scented candle

The smell of lavender is known for its relaxing qualities.

Heated blanket

Stay warm inside when it's cold outside.

Chamomile tea

If you're dealing with sleep disruptions, a cup before bed may help you sleep soundly.

Resources

<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/seasonal-affective-disorder>

<https://www.aafp.org/pubs/afp/issues/2000/0301/p1531.html>

<https://mhanational.org/conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad>

<https://wchh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/pnp.173>