



# Bloody SAD

**THE DAYS ARE SHORTER, THE WEATHER'S CRAP AND YOU'RE DEPRESSED. JOANNE CHRISTIE SAYS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE THREE IS REAL, BUT YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT**

**Not too many** people would say they liked spending winter in the UK. Surviving your first frosty winter can be a real challenge, especially for those of us who hail from warmer southern hemisphere climates.

But for some it's more than just their least favourite time of year. According to the Mental Health Foundation, about one in every 50 people living in the UK suffers from seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a kind of depression that sets in over the winter, with a further one in eight suffering a

milder type of illness described as the 'winter blues'.

John Simmonds, of the Seasonal Affective Disorder Association (SADA), explains that the symptoms of SAD usually begin between September and November and continue until March or April, coinciding with the shortening of days and the decrease in natural levels of light.

"For many, SAD is a seriously disabling illness, preventing them from functioning normally without continuous medical treatment. For others, it is a mild but debilitating

condition causing discomfort but not severe suffering, more commonly known as 'winter blues'," Simmonds says.

Unlike many other forms of depression, SAD is directly linked to the environment, so if you've been feeling low, piling on the pounds and struggling to stay awake, you may be suffering the effects of this wintry ailment.

The condition is caused by a lack of sunlight, and given that many of us are heading to and from work in the dark these days, it's not hard to understand how we're missing out. Not getting enough light causes a biochemical imbalance in our brains, and changes in melatonin and serotonin levels that wreak havoc on our bodies.

This cyclical kind of depression is thought to have been around for at least 150 years, but was only labelled SAD in 1984 following detailed investigations by American physicians Rosenthal and Wehr. SAD rarely appears in those living within 30 degrees of the equator and becomes more

common the further away you get, explaining why those from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa are unlikely to have encountered it at home.

And there is even some emerging

### **If you've been feeling low, piling on the pounds and struggling to stay awake, you may be suffering the effects of this wintry ailment**

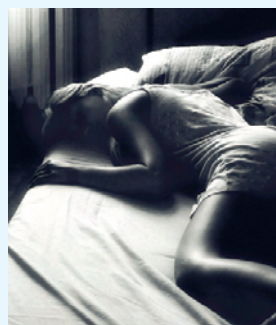
evidence to suggest those of us who move north may be more at risk, according to Iain Ryrie, programme director of research at the Mental Health Foundation.

Ryrie says a study conducted by Birmingham University comparing the general mood of Asian women who had lived all their lives in the UK with those who had relocated here from Asia found that the latter were more susceptible to depression over the winter. He says similar studies conducted on university students in New

England, America also found that the students who had relocated from southern states suffered more in the winter than those who had lived there all their lives.

So, if you're really struggling to adjust to the chilly winter climate, it may be that you just can't cope with the drastic change of climate between your home country and the chilly winters of the UK.

Ryrie assures people there is plenty of help available, and the ►



### **Symptoms of SAD or winter blues**

- Oversleeping and difficulty staying awake
- Disturbed sleep and early morning wakening
- Unexplained fatigue
- Cravings for carbohydrates and sweet foods, commonly causing weight gain
- Feelings of depression, despair, misery, guilt, anxiety
- Lack of interest in sex
- Low levels of motivation
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling irritable, tense and stressed
- Aches and pains in joints
- Lowered immune system
- Headaches
- Inability to communicate
- Feeling unable to interact in social situations

TNT IMAGES, GETTY IMAGES, WWW.BRITAINONVIEW.COM



external causes of winter depression may make it easier for people to deal with.

"I think because of that connection with natural cycles it is a much easier mental health condition to talk about than something like schizophrenia which people may feel is just borne of somebody being mad," says Ryrie. "We are able to externalise the cause of our mental health problems so we can say there is an understandable cause — 'it's not me, it's the climate'."

But, as with all mental illnesses, genetics also play some part in determining one's chances of suffering from SAD.

"For some people there may actually be a genetic predisposition that either protects them from it wherever they move or predisposes them to it regardless of where they move," explains Ryrie.

### Getting through it

If you are suffering from SAD, or the more moderate winter blues, there are a number of ways you can help yourself get through the winter unscathed.

### Light therapy is reported to be successful for about 80% of sufferers

The more traditional depression treatments such as anti-depressants and herbal medicines can help but those in favour of more natural solutions can also try light therapy which is reported to be successful for about 80% of sufferers.

Basically, it involves sitting in front of a light box, preferably first thing in the morning, to stimulate the brain into thinking it is receiving more sunlight than it actually is.

Lightboxes typically have at least 2500lux (the unit by which light intensity is measured), whereas ordinary light bulbs may contain only 200-500lux.

"Light therapy is an important and clinically proven treatment for seasonal depression. It is non-invasive, non-chemical and enables anyone with SAD to control their symptoms as naturally and effectively as possible," explains SAD expert, consultant psychiatrist Dr Jan Wise.

But deciding to purchase a lightbox is a bit of a cost — even the cheaper models cost at least £90, though most firms do offer a trial period, so if you get one and use it for a month with no effect, you get your money back.

If all the solutions so far seem just a bit extreme, there are simpler things you can do to get by. For starters, getting outdoors, ►





exercising and sitting near windows can all help. It's also particularly important during winter to regulate your diet, alcohol intake and sleep patterns. And keeping up social networks is also vital, according to Ryrie.

**"Taking time to nurture ourselves is equally important, so a bit of pampering is vital"**

"In the winter months we may become less sociable so it is important to consciously remember to have that kind of healthy interaction," he says. "Taking time to nurture ourselves is equally important so a bit of pampering is vital." And if the experts are recommending spoiling ourselves, who are we to argue? ■

■ For more information, see [www.litebook.info](http://www.litebook.info); [www.outsidein.co.uk](http://www.outsidein.co.uk); [www.britebox.co.uk](http://www.britebox.co.uk); [www.sada.org.uk](http://www.sada.org.uk); [www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk).

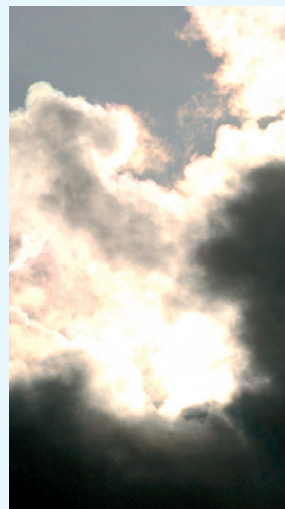


**A sufferer's tale: Melanie Edrich, 26**

"I have always been a real kind of summery person; I just love the sun and really enjoy outdoor stuff so winter has always been something I dread. But I just thought it is winter, everyone gets a bit down at winter and it was only really this year that I started seriously thinking I had seasonal affective disorder.

When you are getting up and it is dark and you go home from work and it is dark, it's a bit depressing and generally my mood is always a lot lower in the winter and I find it much harder to motivate myself and go out and do stuff. I have always saved two weeks of my holidays to go somewhere long-haul and get some sun because I know how much I hate being in England when it is dark and cold. Going away is definitely something I recommend — I just recently returned from South Africa. This year I also tried light therapy and it seemed to make a huge difference which kind of surprised me. I was a bit

sceptical, it seems odd that something like that can actually help. In the mornings I have it on my desk at work and it wasn't a difference I noticed straight away but gradually over time I just suddenly realised that I wasn't really thinking about the fact that it was winter and dark and dismal. I'm not so stressed about winter anymore and I feel more sociable."





## Ways to pamper yourself

- Hit the sunbed, not only will you feel warm, you'll look nice and tanned
- Go on a holiday somewhere warm, a couple of weeks in the sun can be a great battery recharger
- Spend a day or even a weekend at a spa or sauna rejuvenating
- Go to a beauty parlour and have a massage — basically anything that makes you feel relaxed and happy will benefit your mood



### Celebrity Sufferer

It's not just us mere mortals who suffer the winter blues. Daniel Bedingfield got it so bad he had to head back to New Zealand for the summer of 2004 after being diagnosed with SAD. "I suffer from winter depression. I lack certain substances in my body so I get depressed easier when there is little or no light," Bedingfield explained at the time.