

Feeling SAD?

While many of us enjoy the lead up to the festive season, and spending time with friends and family until the New Year, January can often bring a bit of a slump in our mood.

Taking care of our mental health is absolutely vital – especially those working and volunteering in voluntary and community services that our clients are so often highly dependent on. It's really important to take care of your own wellbeing, in order to better support those who are turning to you for help, advice and assistance.

The cost of living crisis is beginning to bite, the post Christmas credit card bills are landing on our doormat, and the continuing short days, damp and cold weather without the sparkle and glow of Christmas lights can make January a bit of a low season. However, for many, the January blues could be seasonal affective disorder (SAD) - a type of depression that comes and goes in a seasonal pattern.

SAD is sometimes known as "winter depression" because the symptoms are usually more apparent and more severe during the winter. Symptoms of SAD can include:

- a persistent low mood
- a loss of pleasure or interest in normal everyday activities
- irritability
- feelings of despair, guilt and worthlessness
- feeling lethargic (lacking in energy) and sleepy during the day
- sleeping for longer than normal and finding it hard to get up in the morning
- craving carbohydrates and gaining weight
- difficulty concentrating
- decreased sex drive
- For some people, these symptoms can be severe and have a significant impact on their day-to-day activities.

What causes SAD?

The exact cause of SAD is not fully understood, but it's often linked to reduced exposure to sunlight during the shorter autumn and winter days. The main theory is that a lack of sunlight might stop a part of the brain called the hypothalamus working properly, which may affect the:

- production of melatonin – melatonin is a hormone that makes you feel sleepy; in people with SAD, the body may produce it in higher than normal levels
- production of serotonin – serotonin is a hormone that affects your mood, appetite and sleep; a lack of sunlight may lead to lower serotonin levels, which is linked to feelings of depression
- body's internal clock (circadian rhythm) – your body uses sunlight to time various important functions, such as when you wake up, so lower light levels during the winter may disrupt your body clock and lead to symptoms of SAD
- It's also possible that some people are more vulnerable to SAD as a result of their genes, as some cases appear to run in families.

When to see a GP

You should consider seeing the GP if you think you might have SAD and you're struggling to cope.

The GP can carry out an assessment to check your mental health. They may ask you about your mood, lifestyle, eating habits and sleeping patterns, plus any seasonal changes in your thoughts and behaviour.

Treatments for SAD

A range of treatments are available for SAD. The GP will recommend the most suitable treatment programme for you.

The main treatments are:

- lifestyle measures – including getting as much natural sunlight as possible, exercising regularly and managing your stress levels
- light therapy – where a special lamp called a light box is used to simulate exposure to sunlight
- talking therapies – such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or counselling
- antidepressant medicine – such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)

Sobus would urge all VCS organisations to check-in with your staff and volunteers (as well as your service users) to ensure people who may be struggling with their emotional wellbeing are encouraged to access the support that is available to them.

Mental health support is provided by IAPT (improving access to psychological therapies). The IAPT service for Hammersmith & Fulham is called Back On Track., and they offer talking therapies for people over 18 who live in or have a GP in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham.

They can help with common problems like stress, anxiety and depression. It could be you are feeling low, having trouble sleeping, or feeling frightened.

Back on Track use different talking therapies to help you feel better. Their sessions are structured and take place over a short time, usually about 8 to 10 weeks.

You can ask for a referral from your GP or any other health or social care professional, or call them for free on 0800 328 4444.