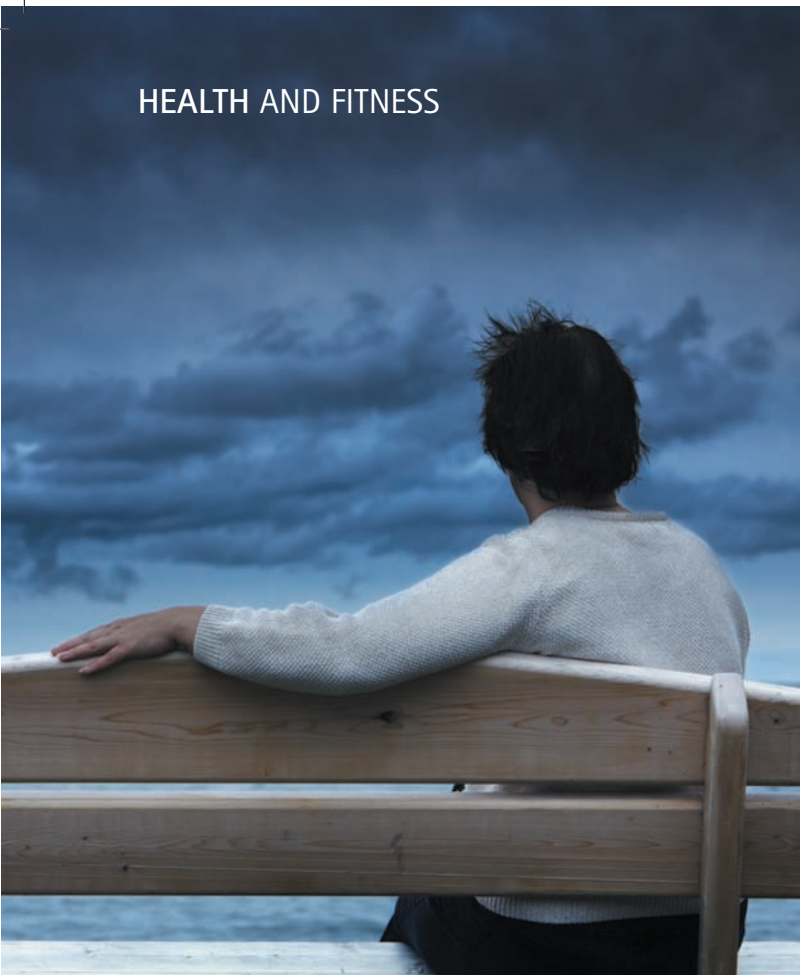


HEALTH AND FITNESS



Happy or Sad this Winter

Seasonal Affective Disorder affects 15% of islanders.

It's that time of year again and as the nights draw in many islanders will be preparing more than for just the winter.

Will there old habit return to haunt them again this year?

Mark Shields Investigates.

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What is seasonal affective disorder?

SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) is a type of depression that affects approximately 1 in 8 people every winter between September and April, in particular during December, January and February. It is caused by a biochemical imbalance in the hypothalamus due to the shortening of daylight hours and the lack of sunlight in winter. The hormone melatonin is produced by the pineal gland at night and it aids sleep, natural sunlight suppresses the production of melatonin and improves immune function. Therefore, during the winter months when natural sunlight is at its lowest SAD can occur.

For many people SAD is a seriously disabling illness, preventing them from functioning normally without continuous medical treatment. For others, 1 in 50, it is a mild but debilitating condition causing tiredness, lethargy, sleep and eating problems. It is commonly known as "the winter blues".

SAD may begin at any age but the main age of onset is between 18 and 40 years. It occurs throughout the northern and southern hemispheres but is extremely rare in those living within 30 degrees of the Equator, where daylight hours are long, constant and extremely bright.

Symptoms of SAD

Many of people are puzzled year after year when every winter they seem to feel tired, lethargic, and suffer a loss of enthusiasm or energy. A great deal of those people do not realize that they are experiencing the symptoms are SAD, instead they believe that it is the feeling of the lazy days of summer disappearing and the grey days winter are approaching.

The main recognizable symptoms of SAD are the following:

- Sleep problems, with sometimes a desire to oversleep, or alternatively a trouble in sleeping with disturbed sleep and early morning awakening.
- Lack of energy and a feeling of fatigue affecting normal daily functioning.
- Weight gain and overeating. This involves a craving for carbohydrates like bread and potatoes and a craving for sweet foods and junk food.
- Feelings of gloom or depression, guilt and a loss of self esteem or interest in normal activities.
- A lack of interest in going out and socializing. Deliberately avoiding social contact with friends and family.
- Feelings of anxiousness, stress and irritability. A general lack of patience.
- Low sex drive and physical contact with their partner.
- Extreme mood changes, with sufferers literally surfing a wave of emotional changes many times a day.

Most sufferers show signs of a weakened immune system during the winter, and are more vulnerable to infections and other illnesses.

SAD symptoms disappear in spring, either suddenly with a short period (e.g., four weeks) of hypomania or hyperactivity, or gradually, depending on the intensity of sunlight in the spring and early summer.

Treating SAD

Your local GP

This should always be your first option as your GP will always be able to check your symptoms in order to confirm SAD and recommend all the appropriate treatments and medical options.

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Light box treatment

By exposing patients to very bright light (at least ten times the intensity of ordinary domestic lighting) for up to four hours per day (average 1-2 hours) light therapy has been shown to be effective in up to 85 per cent of diagnosed cases.

Some light boxes emit higher intensity of light, up to 10,000 Lux, which can cut treatment time down to half an hour a day. Light boxes have to be bought from specialist retailers and are priced around £100

Obviously staring into a light bulb or directly at the sun is dangerous and this is not the kind of treatment being suggested. On average we all need up to one and a half hours daylight a day but as an absolute minimum 4 hours of at least 2500 Lux which we cannot get from being inside.

It is important to understand light is measured by what we call Lux. To get this in perspective a candle gives out 1 Lux, a household light bulb 350 Lux, and the sun in the summer gives out 100,000 Lux. Even on a winters afternoon the winter sun can give out as much as 30,000 Lux. Have you ever wondered why you feel better when the sun shines?

Light treatment should be used daily in winter starting in early autumn when the first symptoms appear. It consists of sitting two to three feet away from a specially designed light box, usually on a table, allowing the light to shine directly through the eyes. The user can carry out normal activity such as reading, working, and eating while stationary in front of the box. It is not necessary to stare at the light although it has been proved safe with using a SAD adapted light box.

Treatment is usually effective within three or four days and the effect continues provided it is used every day. Tinted lenses, or any device that blocks the light to the retina of the eye, does not tend to help sufferers of SAD.

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Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy, counseling or any complementary therapy which helps the sufferer to relax, accept their illness and cope with its limitations are extremely useful.

Integrated mind therapies, inclusive of Neuro Linguistic Programming, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and Hypnotherapy

have also proven to be very effective.

Five steps to a SAD free future on Jersey

My five simple steps to help keep SAD away for good.

As SAD can begin as early as September, you need to start now.

Ensure you walk for a minimum of one and a half hours outside every day. This could be to work or school or even during your lunch breaks. Even in the winter you can be exposed of up to 30,000lux. Get and stay outside as regular and often as you can

Keep the wearing of sunglasses to a minimum but do not stare at the sun.

Ensure you have a weekly exercise program. It is important to choose a motivating and satisfying activity, and it can prove very motivational and useful to find someone to share this activity with you. Start with 2 sessions per week for six weeks rising the three sessions thereafter.

Be conscious of your diet and ensure you keep carbohydrates to a minimum, eating balanced meals every day with fruit, vegetables and grains such as brown rice. Avoid refined sugar as this can cause fluctuations in your blood sugar levels which can greatly affect your mood.

To summarise, get as much daylight as you possibly can. Avoid wearing sunglasses.

Go for a daily walk for at least an hour every day. It will drive your endorphin production the bodies natural opiates which turn combat adrenaline and reduce mood related problems. You will get your light relief and mood relief twice from two different external factors.

Remember, SAD is seasonal. It goes in the same way it comes. Therefore it is temporary.

The spring, lighter nights and normality are only a few weeks away.

I am always happy to answer any questions with regards to my monthly articles and can be contacted by email info@lifepractice.co.uk or by telephone 01462 451473.

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