

# TIP OF THE MONTH

## Managing Seasonal Affective Disorder

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Seasonal Affective Disorder is a form of depression that is linked to changes in the seasons.

Most commonly it corresponds with the fall and winter months, though some people experience it around spring and summer as well. Common symptoms include decreased energy, low mood, low motivation, and irritability. Many people also experience sleep disruption, appetite changes, weight gain or loss, and anxiety.

While much is still unknown about SAD, some causal factors may include seasonal changes in melatonin levels that affect mood and sleep, drops in serotonin levels from reduced sunlight, and circadian rhythm disruptions in response to decreased sunlight in winter. People who already experience depression, anxiety, or bipolar disorder may have increased risk for SAD and may notice seasonal affects on their symptoms.

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If you think you may be experiencing SAD, feel free to reach out to FEAP for support. There are steps you can take to manage it and improve year round mood and motivation.

Common treatments for SAD include light therapy, counseling, medication, and changes to home and lifestyle routines.

Light therapy is a primary treatment for fall-onset SAD and involves sitting in front of a special light box that exposes you to bright light that can mimic natural sunlight and help affect brain chemicals linked to mood. Light therapy can be helpful within a few days/weeks and many people report a reduction in SAD symptoms with consistent use of a light box.

Counseling can also be an effective treatment for SAD. Approaches that have shown particular usefulness include cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness. Counseling can help you manage stress, improve self-care and coping, and respond differently to negative thoughts and behaviors that may be affecting your mood. FEAP is available for short-term counseling and/or to make referrals and help you get connected with a therapist in the community.

Some people find that antidepressant medication treatment helps relieve SAD symptoms. Talk with your doctor

about the possibility of medication management and know that it may take several weeks or year-round treatment for antidepressants to offer full benefits.

There are many home and lifestyle changes that can also help relieve SAD symptoms. A counselor can assist you in developing a personal wellness plan or you may try some of these strategies on your own.

Changes that may be helpful include:

- Regular exercise (30 minutes a day, 5 days a week)
- Get outside (sitting, walking, exercise in the natural light – even if cloudy)
- Make your home sunnier (open blinds, trim trees, sit by window, get a light box)
- Get outdoors or use light box EARLY in the day
- Consider a Vitamin D supplement (in consultation with doctor)
- Have a healthy diet (Balanced with plenty of fruits, veggies, water, and Vitamin D)
- Have good sleep hygiene (7-9 hours, careful not to oversleep!)
- Keep a consistent schedule (Create a routine and stick to it)
- Learn stress management and relaxation techniques (Breathing, body scans, guided imagery)
- Reach out to social supports (Connect safely with those you enjoy)

Feap is here to assist you. [Explore resources on our website](#) or contact us at 434.243.2643.

## UVA FACULTY EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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