



AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION
1000 WILSON BOULEVARD, SUITE 1825, ARLINGTON, VA 22209

NEWS RELEASE

For Information Contact:

Jessica Mikulski, 703-907-8562
jmikulski@psych.org

For Immediate Release:

November 23, 2004
Release No. 04-60

Coping with Winter Depression Tips for Managing Seasonal Affective Disorder

Arlington, Va. – During the fall and winter months, some people suffer from symptoms of depression that can appear gradually or that come on all at once. These symptoms often dissipate when spring arrives and stay in remission through the summer months. Symptoms of depression that come during the colder months can be associated with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). This mood disorder is often attributed to the lack of light during the colder months of the year.

“SAD is a real mood disorder that requires diagnosis and may require treatment. If you regularly experience a significant, lasting, downturn of mood when the weather gets colder and daylight lessens then you should consider consulting a psychiatrist or other health professional to discuss your symptoms,” says Douglas Jacobs, M.D., Executive Director of the nonprofit organization Screening for Mental Health and Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

SAD has been linked to a biochemical imbalance in the brain brought on by the shortening of daylight hours and a lack of sunlight in winter. The most difficult months for SAD sufferers are January and February. Younger persons and women are thought to be at higher risk. There is also some evidence suggesting that the farther someone lives from the equator, the more likely they are to develop SAD.

Whereas the exact number of Americans suffering from SAD is not known, it is believed that between 10 and 20 percent of the U.S. population may suffer from mild symptoms associated with the disorder. These symptoms can include:

- excessive sleeping, difficulty staying awake, overeating, and weight gain during the fall or winter months;
- feelings of extreme fatigue, inability to maintain regular lifestyle schedule;
- depression (feelings of sadness, loss of feelings, apathy) combined with irritability;
- lack of interest in social interactions, losing interest in activities of enjoyment;
- remission of symptoms in the spring and summer months.

Those suffering from mild cases of SAD can benefit from additional exposure to the sun. This can include a long walk outside or arranging your home or office so that you are exposed to a window during the day. For many suffering from more severe cases of the condition, light therapy (phototherapy) has proven an effective treatment option. This form of therapy involves exposure to very bright light (usually from a special fluorescent lamp) for a few hours each day during the winter months. Additional relief has been found with psychotherapy sessions, and in some cases, prescription of antidepressants.

-more-

“Getting screened and evaluated is a smart, sensible way to take care of your health and ensure that you can enjoy the pleasures of the season,” says Jacobs. Symptoms of SAD can be confused with other medical conditions, such as hypothyroidism or viral infections like mononucleosis, so a proper evaluation by a medical professional is crucial.

If you feel you are suffering from SAD, consult with your doctor about possible treatment options or log onto www.psych.org and click on “District Branches & State Associations” to locate an APA District Branch for a psychiatric physician in your state or visit www.mentalhealthscreening.org to locate a depression screening site near you.

The American Psychiatric Association is a national medical specialty society, founded in 1844, whose close to 36,000 physician members specialize in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illnesses including substance use disorders. For more information, visit the APA Web site at www.psych.org.

###