

PREPARING FOR SAD

As the days start to draw in, **Katy Lassetter** highlights the early signs of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) so you can better care for yourself and your clients

WORDS KATY LASSETTER

Over 970 million people around the world live with mental health disorders such as depression (HME, 2021). SAD is a type of depression and, as the days shorten, more than physical darkness looms for SAD sufferers. Understanding SAD and how it can affect you and your clients will help enhance your practice.

WHAT IS SAD?

As acronyms go, this one is spot on. SAD is a form of depression with a seasonal pattern. Although SAD symptoms can occur in the summer, it is often referred to as 'winter depression' because this is when it is most severe for many people (NHS, 2022).

While the exact cause is unclear, SAD is often associated with decreased exposure to sunlight. It is thought less sunlight stops the hypothalamus (a part of the brain that produces hormones) from working efficiently.

In people with SAD, the body may produce higher than normal levels of melatonin – the sleepy hormone. Serotonin levels may also lower, affecting mood and appetite. Additionally, with lower light, circadian rhythms do not always kick into action. This means people with SAD cannot wake up as easily. The weather and temperature could also trigger or worsen the depression.

I asked Kate Nilski, a copywriter and self-confessed 'mental health banger-omni', about her experiences of living with SAD for over 10 years. When asked how SAD makes her feel, Kate revealed that the lethargy gets to her: "I just feel so tired and want to sleep all the time. There are days when I can embrace this by snuggling under a blanket with a book, but on days when you need to really perform, it can be hard to get motivated – or even wake up properly. There's a dose of the old black cloud syndrome as well."

SPOTTING SAD SIGNS

Considering SAD can strike in any season, and all people are different, symptoms can vary in severity and include (Mind, 2022):

- Persistent low mood – feeling sad, tearful, guilty, or hopeless
- Feeling irritable, anxious, and angry
- Lacking energy and feeling sleepy during the day
- Sleeping for longer than normal and finding it hard to wake
- Loss of interest in seeing people and doing everyday activities
- Changes in appetite – losing or gaining weight
- Becoming susceptible to physical health problems such as colds and infections
- Difficulty concentrating
- Decreased interest in physical contact
- Suicidal thoughts

These are all signs you can look for in yourself and your clients.

SAD SELF-CARE

When suffering from poor mental health, such as SAD, you need to look after yourself before focusing on others. Kate sees a mental health counsellor fortnightly who reminds her to check in with herself year-round. For ultimate self-care, she finds daily mindfulness and journaling useful: "Mindfulness sessions will help you tune in with your mind and body. Noting your moods in a journal is useful as you can easily forget the bad days when things are going well. Then I'd take this list to your doctor and see what they recommend."

Kate adds: "Don't overlook your SAD as unimportant or incidental. It's as vital as any health condition and can be so effectively levelled out if you're aware of it."

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CLIENTS

CONSULT – Ask if your client suffers from poor mental health during your consultation and, if SAD comes up, consider whether they display any of the symptoms described on the previous page. At this point, you can reassure them that you understand the condition and that your treatment experience can offer relief.

BOOST – Is there anything you can incorporate into your practice to help boost your client's energy levels, mood, and immunity? Whether it is a particular move, meditation, or essential oil, this could make all the difference to a SAD sufferer's enjoyment and benefit, while encouraging them to come back.

TOLERATE – There might be times a SAD sufferer needs to cancel, or feels less inclined to attend, an appointment. As long as they respect your cancellation policy and do not leave you out of pocket, exercise patience and flexibility. This could help encourage them to rebook.

Kate also suggests: "Because of my feelings around safety and vulnerability, I like treatment rooms to be low-light, calm, quiet, and super closed-off. But some might like a daylight lamp or to sit next to a nice, big window, so this would be a fab option."

Remember, if you are not a trained mental health practitioner, it is important to be cautious and aware when offering advice to your client. Although holistic therapy may or could help with SAD, always advise your clients to seek help from a qualified mental health professional if they have further concerns.

MORE SELF-CARE TECHNIQUES RECOMMENDED BY MIND, THE MENTAL HEALTH CHARITY

COMPLEMENTARY THERAPY – Whether it is giving yourself a facial or practising calm breathing, there are ways to draw on your therapist expertise. This will help relieve stress and muscle tension while activating the immune system and improving your mood, concentration, and sleep quality.

HERBAL THERAPY – Various herbal remedies and supplements have been linked with easing depression and anxiety. St John's wort has been used as an alternative treatment for centuries. Chamomile and lavender are well known for promoting calm and sleep. Ashwagandha can help control the release of stress hormones from the adrenal glands as well as support good sleep patterns and boost energy (Mackonochie, 2020).

LIGHT THERAPY – Giving off strong stimulating white or blue light, light boxes are a common go-to for people with SAD. You can even buy alarm clocks that simulate dawn to help you get up. My mum finds this particularly helpful when the clocks go back in October. However, it is worth noting that light therapy might not be suitable if you are using other treatments that make your skin sensitive to light.

ECOTHERAPY – Connecting with nature is one of the best ways to improve mental health (Mental Health Foundation, 2022). Spending two hours a week in green spaces has been linked with people feeling healthier and happier (Vaughan, 2019). Ecotherapy is not restricted to forest bathing and outdoor sound immersion, it can be as simple as appreciating the smell of earthy, autumnal woodlands and listening to the rustle of falling leaves. If you cannot get outside, drawing or writing about your favourite wild space is great for strengthening that connection. **13**

Katy Lassetter is a writer passionate about holistic therapies. She's worked with aromatherapists, hypnotherapists and other related specialists, and managed the social media marketing for the Story Massage Programme. Living with ME, fibromyalgia, and an autoimmune disease for over 16 years, Katy has gained valuable experience using complementary therapies to manage her health over time. This has given her the empathy needed to write about others receiving treatments. Email katy@chichestercopywriter.co.uk or visit chichestercopywriter.co.uk