

COPING WITH S.A.D. (SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER) by Fiona Marshall and Peter Cheevers. Published by Sheldon Press. ISBN : 0-85969-873-4

Despite the rather boring cover this is a gem of a book and I shall try to restrain myself from quoting too many bits of it at you. It's written in easy-to-understand language and is stuffed full of interesting information. And I love books which offer all sorts of ways of dealing with a problem.

Seasonal Affective Disorder is the kind of depression that comes on around autumn and leaves around spring, in a regular annual fashion. For 2% - 3% of sufferers it is every bit as disabling as "normal" (!) acute depression; for about 30% of people it can be pretty bad too.

If you live around the earth's waist you are not very likely to get it - if you live in a Scandinavian country your chances of getting it are quite high. Many Northern Europeans and Canadians are SAD sufferers, because of shorter hours of daylight for half the year.

The link between daylight and health is not a modern phenomenon. In the 5th century BC Hippocrates was urging doctors to observe the links between seasonal changes and health in animals and humans; in the 19th century doctors recommended their patients visit Italy to cure them of melancholy; phrases such as "light hunger", "grey sky syndrome" and "cabin fever" were used, and ships' doctors observed that the crew grew increasingly lethargic during the arctic winter.

Light is measured in lux: one candle flame is one lux. The average light indoors is between 200 and 700 lux. However outside on a sunny day the light measures around 100,000 lux, and even a dull day has around 30,000 lux on offer! Heliotherapy (exposing sick people to light) is probably as old as mankind. Early last century they wheeled TB patients outside, beds and all, before the advent of antibiotics.

Many of us in the so-called modern world spend our days inside houses, vehicles, offices and shopping malls, and rarely get out under the sky for more than a few minutes. We spend a fortnight a year getting a dose of sunlight then back indoors we go again. Coco Chanel is to blame for making the suntan a fashion accessory; now many of us, hearing how lying in the sun for hours can lead to cancer, are frightened of being in the sun. We have to learn to be more moderate in our exposure to sunshine, and try to be more like our forbears whose everyday routines led them to be outdoors every day, and whose common sense made them seek shade when it was too hot.

Light enters our eyes as we look around us; it hits the back of the retina (which lines the inside of the eyeball), where nerve signals pass through the optic nerve to the pineal gland which is behind the forehead in between the eyes. This gland performs many tasks, including the production of melatonin which promotes sleep. When the light reaches 2,500 lux and more, the pineal gland stops producing melatonin, and we feel more wakeful. As light levels drop, less light means melatonin is produced again and we

start to feel sleepy. Sleep/wake rhythms are part of the body's circadian biological clock which controls hormone production, body temperature, and much more beside.

The book gives a list of SAD symptoms :

- * depression that starts and stops suddenly at regular times of the year
- * eating more than usual
- * craving carbohydrates and sweets
- * weight gain as a result of the above craving
- * extreme tiredness
- * sleeping more than usual
- * lack of energy, loss of interest in usual activities
- * sleep disturbances
- * feelings of sadness and hopelessness
- * cognitive problems - difficulty concentrating and making decisions (tasks you previously found simple now seem complicated)
- * drinking more alcohol than usual
- * drinking more tea and coffee than usual
- * anxiety, tension, and low tolerance of stress
- * irritability
- * social withdrawal
- * blaming others or circumstances
- * wanting to stay at home, not go out
- * loss of libido
- * menstrual problems. PMT may be worse than usual with attendant irritability, sleep problems, appetite changes, low energy levels
- * low body temperature

- * minor physical ailments, such as increased sensitivity to pain, headaches, muscle and joint pain, digestive problems such as irritable bowel, constipation, diarrhoea, palpitations, night sweats

- * more prone to infections such as colds and `flu

- * keener sense of smell and changes in taste

Of course many people experience these symptoms as part of other illnesses, but the first six in particular can indicate SAD.

Lower levels of serotonin, as well as making you feel depressed, may also make you feel unfocussed, with a short attention span, and maybe less able to resist the impulse to fly into a temper or reach out and take that cream doughnut !

The first four chapters tell you what SAD is and who gets it and why, the rest of the book gives you lots of ideas as to how to combat it.

There are plenty of ways you can help yourself through SAD:

- * plan ahead, postpone major life events (family celebrations, house moves) if possible until spring and summer.

- * if you do have to do important events during the darker months do the planning well ahead of time

- * get Christmas sorted well in advance

- * shop on the internet

- * get someone in to help with cleaning, ironing etc if possible

- * cook meals in bulk in advance when you have the energy, and freeze for the busy week when you are tired

- * buy your winter clothes well before it gets really wintry; make sure you have warm clothes to keep you cosy

- * take holidays in the winter if you can afford it!

- * monitor your moods, and make notes so you recognise the warning signs. Or you might need to enrol others to help here as SAD can sneak up on you.

- * monitor your energy levels too. Keep a diary - don't volunteer for the Xmas Fayre unless you are able to retire gracefully with notice if you are not up to it .

- * organize your memory with birthday lists, a calendar, and a card index
- * get at least 20 minutes outdoors every day. Keep a coat and comfortable shoes by the door; do it in bits if you like, e.g. three ten- minute walks
- * if you can also be outside without your glasses for 20 minutes that is good
- * if you cannot get outside, sit near an open window (glass keeps the light from being so beneficial). Put a coat on perhaps.
- * never look directly at the sun of course.
- * avoid the sun when it`s at the hottest part of the day.
- * decorate your home in light colours. Fit daylight bulbs and full spectrum bulbs. Open curtains wide. Prune shrubs and trees that shade your windows
- * sit near a window at work.
- * keep warm - check your insulation and glazing.
- * observe the good rules of sleeping well- routines for getting up and bedtimes, wind-down rituals, maybe allow a lie- in one day a week, or afternoon naps if you really can`t stay awake all day.
- * keep physically active- especially walking instead of driving - 20-30 minutes a day
- * if life really is a misery half the year some people move to a sunnier country!
- * use light therapy (see below)

A useful chapter on nutrition points out that different types of food can be utilised to make different brain chemicals. Tryptophan-rich foods can be used to make serotonin. Eating complex carbohydrates (bread, potatoes, oats, rice, pasta) give one energy, whereas simple carbohydrates like cakes and biscuits with their loading of sugar are to be avoided. It seems that people with SAD appear to process sugar differently in winter. Dr Kathleen Des Maisons has worked out that “a diet designed to combat cravings for sugar and alcohol boosts levels of the brain chemicals serotonin, dopamine and betaendorphins naturally” as described in her book “Potatoes Not Prozac”.

A chapter on exercise says “a number of studies have shown that, for people with SAD, exercising in the light is a key factor in improving mood”. In an experiment they got one group of people to exercise indoors and the result was improved vitality. The other group exercised outdoors and they improved in vitality too but also in their general mental health and social functioning and it alleviated symptoms of depression. There is a long list of suggestions of activities to encourage you to get outside and busy, always

bearing in mind that, like our magazine`s motto it is good to do things gradually and build up, one step at a time. Wonderfully the idea that light exposure gives quick relief in many cases is reiterated time and again throughout the book.

Finally the book ends discussing even more ways to alleviate symptoms of SAD. I wish I had room to give details as there are a lot of valuable ideas , but I will try to summarise by saying that it talks about drug therapy, psychotherapy, vitamins, Bio-feedback, L-tryptophan, Melatonin, St Johns Wort, Aromatherapy, ionisers, laughter therapy, sounds of nature, music, visualisation techniques, breathing correctly

In case you haven`t guessed, I thought this was a brilliant book!

Pat Whitaker

Pat Whitaker is a member of DA who is currently setting up a DA self-help group in Collier Row, Essex. If you are interested in this group please contact Pam Todd at DA (pam@depressionalliance.org or by post to the DA office).