# Breaking the cycle: new approaches to treating seasonal Affective Disorder emerge as understanding deepens



As the evenings grow darker and colder, many people find themselves wrestling with more than just the changing weather. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that disproportionately affects individuals in the autumn and winter months, casting a prolonged shadow on their mental wellbeing. Though it is widely underappreciated, SAD impacts around one in 15 to one in 30 people in the UK, manifesting as an enduring low mood that coincides predictably with dwindling daylight hours.

Dr Max Pemberton highlights how this condition is often mistaken for simple winter blues, when in truth it is a recognized medical disorder with symptoms mirroring classic depression: persistent low mood, lethargy, difficulty concentrating, changes in appetite with a marked craving for carbohydrates, and an overwhelming urge to withdraw socially. Unlike general depression, SAD follows a cyclical pattern, reliably emerging as the days shorten and easing as spring returns. The brain’s struggle to adapt to reduced sunlight disrupts serotonin production—a neurotransmitter essential to mood regulation—and melatonin levels, which control sleep cycles, further aggravating symptoms. According to Dr Pemberton, these biochemical shifts underpin the heavy, oppressive feelings that patients describe as a sense of wading through treacle for several months each year.

This condition’s complexity is exacerbated by common coping behaviours that inadvertently fuel the cycle of depression. People often retreat indoors, reduce social engagements, comfort-eat sugary and starchy foods, and diminish their physical activity, unaware that these actions worsen their symptoms. The reliance on carbohydrate-rich comfort foods may provide a short-lived spike in serotonin but generally leads to blood sugar crashes that deepen mood swings and fatigue. Withdrawal from social contact, despite natural instincts, is one of the most damaging responses since isolation intensifies depressive feelings. Dr Pemberton and clinical research alike stress the importance of maintaining social connections and engaging with outdoor activities, even when motivation is low.

Medical experts from institutions such as the Mayo Clinic, the NHS, and Johns Hopkins Medicine corroborate these insights, noting the importance of daylight exposure in regulating circadian rhythms and neurotransmitter balance. Treatment modalities widely recommended include light therapy—using devices that simulate sunlight especially in the mornings—psychological therapies like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and antidepressant medications for more severe cases. Furthermore, studies indicate that people living farther from the equator are especially vulnerable to SAD, with women and younger individuals also facing higher risks.

Practical advice for those affected centers on integrating regular outdoor activities during daylight hours, prioritising balanced nutrition over quick carbohydrate fixes, and fostering social support networks. Light therapy boxes, backed by robust evidence, have become a frontline intervention. Recognising SAD early and seeking medical advice can significantly ease suffering, with talking therapies and antidepressants providing additional options where required.

More broadly, Dr Pemberton reflects on societal attitudes toward mental health, highlighting a concerning increase in fear and stigma around mental illness, despite evidence showing the low risk posed by those affected. He also touches on the influence of lifestyle choices on health, such as quitting smoking prompted by practical considerations like insurance, and points to simple dietary improvements, such as increased fibre intake through fruits like kiwi, as meaningful steps to overall wellbeing.

Ultimately, while the darker months inevitably bring challenges, understanding and addressing Seasonal Affective Disorder can empower sufferers to reclaim their mental health and ease the weight of winter’s gloom.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15206727/anxious-tired-difficulty-concentrating-common-widely-misunderstood-condition-DR-MAX-PEMBERTON.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[4]](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/seasonal-affective-disorder), [[2]](https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20364651), [[3]](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad/overview/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15206727/anxious-tired-difficulty-concentrating-common-widely-misunderstood-condition-DR-MAX-PEMBERTON.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20364651), [[3]](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad/overview/), [[4]](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/seasonal-affective-disorder)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15206727/anxious-tired-difficulty-concentrating-common-widely-misunderstood-condition-DR-MAX-PEMBERTON.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20364651), [[3]](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad/overview/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15206727/anxious-tired-difficulty-concentrating-common-widely-misunderstood-condition-DR-MAX-PEMBERTON.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20364651), [[3]](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad/overview/), [[4]](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/seasonal-affective-disorder), [[6]](https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/seasonal-affective-disorder), [[7]](https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/diagnosis-treatment/drc-20364722)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15206727/anxious-tired-difficulty-concentrating-common-widely-misunderstood-condition-DR-MAX-PEMBERTON.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15206727/anxious-tired-difficulty-concentrating-common-widely-misunderstood-condition-DR-MAX-PEMBERTON.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20364651> - Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that occurs at specific times of the year, typically during the fall and winter months. Common symptoms include persistent low mood, loss of interest in activities, low energy, oversleeping, appetite changes (especially cravings for carbohydrates), weight gain, difficulty concentrating, feelings of hopelessness, and thoughts of self-harm. The exact cause of SAD is not fully understood, but reduced exposure to sunlight may disrupt the body's internal clock and affect serotonin and melatonin levels, influencing mood and sleep patterns. Treatment options include light therapy, psychotherapy, and medications.
3. <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad/overview/> - Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that follows a seasonal pattern, often worsening during the winter months. Symptoms include persistent low mood, loss of interest in daily activities, irritability, feelings of despair, lethargy, excessive sleep, carbohydrate cravings leading to weight gain, difficulty concentrating, and decreased sex drive. The exact cause is unclear, but reduced sunlight exposure may disrupt the body's internal clock and affect serotonin levels. Treatments encompass lifestyle changes, light therapy, talking therapies like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and antidepressant medications such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs).
4. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/seasonal-affective-disorder> - Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that occurs during specific seasons, most commonly in fall and winter. Symptoms include increased sleep, loss of interest in activities, social withdrawal, irritability, feelings of guilt and hopelessness, excessive tiredness, decreased sex drive, decreased ability to focus, trouble thinking clearly, increased appetite (especially for sweets and carbohydrates), and weight gain. The exact cause is not fully understood, but reduced exposure to sunlight may disrupt the body's internal clock and affect serotonin and melatonin levels. Treatment options include light therapy, psychotherapy, and antidepressants.
5. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/health/seasonal-affective-disorder/DS00195> - Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that occurs at specific times of the year, typically during the fall and winter months. Common symptoms include persistent low mood, loss of interest in activities, low energy, oversleeping, appetite changes (especially cravings for carbohydrates), weight gain, difficulty concentrating, feelings of hopelessness, and thoughts of self-harm. The exact cause of SAD is not fully understood, but reduced exposure to sunlight may disrupt the body's internal clock and affect serotonin and melatonin levels, influencing mood and sleep patterns. Treatment options include light therapy, psychotherapy, and medications.
6. <https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/seasonal-affective-disorder> - Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a type of depression with a recurring seasonal pattern, most often starting in late fall and early winter and going away in spring and summer. The risk of SAD is higher in people who live far from the equator and those with a personal or family history of depression. Women are more likely than men to develop SAD, and younger people have a higher risk than older ones. Treatments include medication (antidepressants), psychotherapy (such as cognitive behavioral therapy), light therapy, and dietary supplements (such as vitamin D).
7. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/diagnosis-treatment/drc-20364722> - Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that occurs at specific times of the year, typically during the fall and winter months. Common symptoms include persistent low mood, loss of interest in activities, low energy, oversleeping, appetite changes (especially cravings for carbohydrates), weight gain, difficulty concentrating, feelings of hopelessness, and thoughts of self-harm. The exact cause of SAD is not fully understood, but reduced exposure to sunlight may disrupt the body's internal clock and affect serotonin and melatonin levels, influencing mood and sleep patterns. Treatment options include light therapy, psychotherapy, and medications.