“Tis the Season to Be ... SAD?”

UNDERSTANDING SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

Every October, daylight savings time means we all set our clocks and watches back one hour. Or at least we hope to remember to do it! More than one of us has arrived on time the next day, according to our watch, only to realize, to great embarrassment, that we forgot the “spring forward, fall back” ritual.

Daylight Savings, coupled with the earth’s annual tilt away from the sun as winter approaches, means nighttime comes earlier with every day. It seems we’re constantly in darkness from fall until spring. To a great extent this is true. We lose a lot of daylight until March, when the days begin to get longer and ultimately we get to turn our time pieces ahead one hour.

For many of us — as many as 10 million — the onset of winter and substantial loss of daylight during this period can cause Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD. This condition results in exaggerated forms of tiredness, weight gain, lethargy, and “the blues.”

SAD is recognized by the American Psychiatric Association as a subtype of a major depressive episode. The most common age for SAD to appear is in the 30s, although some cases of childhood SAD have been reported. Up to 80% of those who suffer from SAD are women.

What causes SAD? SAD generally increases along with increases in latitude, up to a certain point, and its incidence seems to indicate a relation between a person’s individual vulnerability and degree of exposure to light. For example, someone who lives in Georgia may have no symptoms of SAD, but might develop symptoms at a locale in a higher altitude, such as Ottawa, Canada. Similarly, a person who has SAD symptoms in upstate New York may experience fewer — or no — symptoms in San Diego. Others who work long hours inside a building with little natural light might experience SAD symptoms all year long. Even more sensitive people can experience changes in their mood over long, seemingly endless stretches of cloudy weather.

But just how does the amount of light affect our brain and our moods? Although research is ongoing and a specific, single, agreed-upon link between light and SAD remains elusive, there are two general theories. One theory is that an area of the brain, located near the visual pathway, responds to light by sending a signal to suppress the secretion of a hormone called melatonin. This hormone is naturally produced by the human body. The body increases the production of melatonin as darkness falls, and decreases it as dawn approaches. Melatonin production is directly related to our biological sleep-wake cycle. It makes sleep much more inviting. If light does impact the production of melatonin in this manner, then light would make a person more alert and less lethargic, due to the lower level of melatonin.

Another theory holds that the secret of controlling our daily sleep-wake cycle is in the bloodstream, not the visual-brain connection as mentioned in the theory above. Under this theory, a bright light applied to non-visual areas (for example, behind the knee) showed an impact on the human sleep-wake cycle. Studies for both theories are ongoing, but both theories demonstrate a direct link between loss of — or lessened exposure to — daylight and the onset of SAD.

How is SAD treated? Before determining on your own that you have SAD or seeking any treatment individually, seek the professional assessment of a behavioral health expert. Because medical illnesses or more serious mental health conditions, including depression, can often be difficult to recognize, this is a necessary first step.

Depending on the assessment of the behavioral health professional, treatment could take several paths. Among the different alternatives are select antidepressants, psychotherapy, daily exercise, light boxes and natural light.

Antidepressants to treat SAD are from the Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor class, or SSRI. The names you may recognize for these include Paxil or Zoloft. Lithium has also been useful for treating those who suffer from winter depression and spring-summer mania.

Psychotherapy helps to identify depressive assumptions and negative feelings and expectations that may underpin SAD. It can also help identify any relationship issues or interpersonal problems that heighten the effects of SAD. Research clearly shows that therapy helps relieve depression faster and more completely than none at all.
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Exercising — ideally on a daily basis and outdoors — has shown to have a positive impact on a person’s mood. The increased exposure to outdoor light and physical improvements in health can also help a person develop better eating habits.

Light boxes and outdoor light have both demonstrated a positive impact in combating SAD. Even when the sky is cloudy, the sun provides more light than a light box. One study has shown that as little as one hour a day outside can improve the condition of a person suffering from SAD. Light boxes, on the other hand, require an investment anywhere from $250 to $500 dollars, and require the user to sit in front or under the light for a prescribed period of time. The lengths of time vary widely from person to person, and UV (ultra violet) light can damage eyes and skin, so it must be filtered out. Long-term compliance with a light box treatment program can also prove challenging.

But there is a silver lining behind all the darkness and clouds. The effects of SAD, like the effects of major depression, are highly treatable. So don’t wait until spring for things to pass or the sun to shine again. The sooner you seek the professional assessment of a behavioral health expert, the sooner you can recapture the vitality, drive, and focus that SAD has taken away.

SOURCE: CIGNA Behavioral Health

BENEFITS CORNER
DENTAL COVERAGE

Because it is important to maintain your oral health, the University of Maine System provides employees the opportunity to purchase dental coverage. Northeast Delta Dental insures the dental programs.

The dental program available to you varies by your employment status. Both of the programs offer comprehensive dental coverage including preventive and routine care, minor and major restorative services and orthodontic coverage. Northeast Delta Dental has a comprehensive network of dental care providers. To the extent that you use network providers, you benefit from:

- Negotiated fee schedules
- Protection from “balance billing”
- Providers submitting claims for you

In order to receive a listing of participating Delta Dental providers, please access their website at www.nedelta.com or call Delta Dental directly at 1-800-832-5700.

Also, the University includes two charts outlining available dental coverage in its open enrollment kit booklet. In order to obtain a copy of the two charts, please access the enrollment kit booklet on the University of Maine System website at www.maine.edu/bene.html.
If you have questions regarding whether you are eligible to participate in a dental program, please contact your Campus Benefits Office.

DATES to REMEMBER
Notify Your Campus Benefits/Human Resources Office of Any Change in Your Address After Moving

Studies indicate that we will move up to three or four times in our lifetime. For those of you who have already moved at least once, you have encountered firsthand all of the different aspects involved with the moving process as well as dealing with the amount of “stuff” that can be accumulated over time. For those of you who have not experienced this particular activity of life, the studies indicate that you will likely have that pleasure at some time. Even if you do not actually move, you may need to change your address due to recent E-911 implementations around the state of Maine.

Aside from all of the financial and logistical concerns of moving from one residence to another (regardless of whether you rent or own your home) or E-911 changes, you will need to remember to change your address with utilities, creditors, bureau of motor vehicles, credit card companies, insurance carriers, magazine/newspaper subscriptions, banks, credit unions, water/sewer provider, etc.

Within the University of Maine System, it is equally important that you change your address using the self-service option under PeopleSoft. While this seems fairly straightforward, there are instances every year where employees change their address outside the University; however, do not change it within the University. Or, someone will notify Anthem and/or Delta Dental and assume that the change somehow was conveyed to the University.

To ensure a complete transition to your new address, please remember to change your address within the University by using the self-service option under PeopleSoft.

HELPFUL HINTS for UMS RETIREES
“Helping Us Serve You Better”

If you’ve named a Power of Attorney to act on your behalf should you become incapacitated, please remember that in order for the University of Maine System to discuss matters regarding your pension, health insurance premium payments, or issues regarding health insurance claims we would need to have a copy of the power of attorney document.

ADVANTAGE ACCOUNTS
Happy New Year!

Welcome 2004! Now that the new year is here it’s the perfect time to get your accounts in order. Below are some suggestions that will make that job easier.

2003 Advantage Account Participants: Find out if you have money left in your account! It’s not too late to get reimbursed for those funds in your 2003 account. Remember you have until April 15, 2004 to file claims for services incurred in 2003. Contact Mary Richardson – 973-3380 or maryr@maine.edu if you have questions regarding the status of your 2003 account.

2004 Advantage Account Participants: Review your paycheck stub. Deductions for the 2004 Advantage Account program begin with your first paycheck of the year. If you have questions regarding your deduction, please contact Mary Richardson – 973-3380 or maryr@maine.edu.

Claim forms and reimbursement schedules can be found on our Website at www.maine.edu/bene.html.

Note: If you are submitting claims for both 2003 and 2004 expenses, please use separate claim forms for each calendar year. Also, please remember to use your employee ID number NOT your social security number when completing the claim form. Your employee ID number can be found at the top of your paycheck stub.
HAPPY NEW YEAR! Winter is here so bundle up, but most important stay healthy. Find the dog hidden somewhere in this newsletter and you could win a $25 gift certificate from Wal-Mart. Once you find it, mail the location to the University of Maine System, 107 Maine Avenue, ATTENTION: Benefits Office, Bangor, ME 04401, or e-mail it to benefits@maine.edu describing the location and the page where you found it. You will then be entered into a drawing for the $25 gift certificate. All entries MUST BE IN OUR OFFICE BY MARCH 10, 2004. Drawing to be held on MARCH 12, 2004. Good Luck!

CONGRATULATIONS to Richard Judd, University of Maine employee, winner of October’s Wal-Mart gift certificate.

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In complying with the letter and spirit of applicable laws and in pursuing its own goals of diversity, the University of Maine System shall not discriminate on the grounds of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin or citizenship status, age, disability, or veterans status in employment, education, and all other areas of the University. The University provides reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals with disabilities upon request. Questions and complaints about discrimination in any area of the University should be directed to the campus Equal Opportunity Director.