

FAMILY CAREGIVERS:

Be Aware of Depression Signs This Fall and Winter



Now that fall is in full swing and the days are getting shorter and colder, some people may begin feeling gloomy, sad, or even depressed amid the explosion of fall colors, pumpkin spice, and signs of impending holidays.

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that brings about changes to a person's mood and behavior that accompany the annual change of seasons. SAD, along with depression in all its forms, doesn't have to be debilitating, and it's not something that people "just have to live with".

[National Depression Screening Day](#) is October 6th. Screening Day aims to raise awareness about depression, and it encourages people to complete voluntary mental health screenings for illnesses such as depression, generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, alcoholism, and other substance use conditions.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness ([NAMI](#)), depression is the leading cause of disability in the United States for people between ages 15 and 44. In 2020, about 21 million adults in the U.S. had at least one major depressive episode, according to the National Institute of Mental Health ([NIH](#)).

SAD, or seasonal depression, affects up to [3%](#) of the general population, and 10-20% of people with major depressive disorder.

The first step in recognizing the illness is knowing its symptoms, which are similar to those of major depressive disorder.



Major depressive disorder is characterized by prolonged sadness and a general lack of interest.

Symptoms

[Symptoms](#) of seasonal depression and major depression are below. You may be depressed if you have **some** of these symptoms most of the day, almost every day:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" mood
- Feelings of hopelessness or pessimism
- Feelings of irritability, frustration, or restlessness
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities
- Decreased energy, fatigue, or feeling "slowed down"

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- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Difficulty sleeping, early morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Changes in appetite or unplanned weight changes
- Aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems without a clear physical cause that do not ease even with treatment
- Suicide attempts or thoughts of death or suicide

With SAD, these symptoms coincide with the change of seasons, often in the fall and winter. SAD can also occur with the change of seasons during the spring and summer.

Treatment

Depression is usually treated with medication, psychotherapy, or both. In the case of SAD, this treatment can also include light therapy. With [light therapy](#), a person sits a few feet from a special light box, which mimics natural outdoor light.

Additional home remedies for SAD include:

- **Make your home environment sunnier and brighter** with opened blinds and seats near windows.
- **Get outside** and find ways to soak up the sun. Being outdoors can help even if it's cold or cloudy out.
- **Get regular exercise.** Physical activity can help relieve stress and anxiety.
- **Establish a regular sleep schedule.** Having a regular wake-up time and bedtime can reduce oversleeping and the need for daytime naps.

Family Caregivers

As a loved one progresses through a serious illness, family caregivers can sometimes develop mild or major depression. The constant demands of providing care can be difficult to deal with and lead to significant stress, along with feelings of agitation, anxiety, distress, pessimism, isolation, exhaustion, guilt, and being overwhelmed.

Individuals experiencing these symptoms should work to address their feelings and symptoms of depression early. They can do this through:

- Consultation with a trained health or mental health professional, including medication or therapy
- Exercise
- Healthy diet
- Regular sleep
- Support from family and friends
- Mind-body techniques such as meditation, yoga, and creating art

The care team at Intrepid USA is uniquely prepared to help family caregivers – and those they care for – address their symptoms of depression. In the case of family caregivers, Intrepid can offer tremendous assistance with the caregiving itself, allowing the family caregiver a break from the stress and demands of caring for their loved one. This assistance can include:

- **Respite Care.** Intrepid can take over the loved one's care for an afternoon or a few days or weeks to give the caregiver a well-earned break.
- **Adding at-home healthcare services or**

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non-medical home care can add an extra layer of assistance to both the patient and their family caregiver. By sharing some of the many responsibilities of caregiving, individuals have more time to reduce stress and take care of themselves.

Holiday Red, Green... and Blues?

Sometimes, caregiver stress and depression doesn't surface until the Thanksgiving turkey is on the table and holiday sweaters begin making their way from closets. While some feel the holidays are "the most wonderful time of the year," for others it can trigger depression, dread, and stress. You may love certain things about the holiday season, but also want to avoid others at all costs.

The thought of adding to your heavy caregiving load the tasks of decorating your home, attending holiday events, shopping for guests, and cooking special food can quickly feel overwhelming. Fortunately, there are several things you can do to reduce these feelings and maybe even enjoy the season a little more.

- **Set realistic expectations.** Decide what you and your loved one want and what you're capable of. Don't wait for others to decide your holiday tasks. Know what you can and will do, and give yourself permission to say no.
- **Ask for help.** You don't have to do it all. Ask your family and friends to pitch in with caregiving responsibilities, giving you a little extra time to do what you want to do, or perhaps just a little help in the kitchen.
- **Tell your family and friends how you're doing.** They won't know if you don't tell them, and the act of sharing can help you

lighten your emotional load and give others the opportunity to ask for help.

- **Continue rituals that you and your loved one enjoy.** This can be as simple as sharing a favorite holiday meal together or remembering past holidays together.
- **Home organizing.** The simple act of transforming clutter into calm can translate to improved mental health. Try with a small corner – perhaps a coffee table is covered with things that were dropped there instead of being put away. Clearing that space can equate to a clearer mind. Don't be afraid to throw away, recycle, or donate things that don't make sense to keep.

While the complexity of the fall and winter seasons can make anyone feel overwhelmed, caregivers must take care to pay attention to their mental health and address issues that may arise.

Get Help

To see how you and your loved one may benefit from additional in-home services, [contact Intrepid USA](#) for more information.

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis or is in emotional distress, dial 988 for the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, available 24 hours a day. For text support, text NAMI to 741741.