



COMMANDER'S CALL TALKING POINTS

December 2021



What is Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)?

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), also known as seasonal depression, is a type of mood disorder related to changes in the seasons. SAD tends to sap individuals of energy, increase moodiness, and in severe cases, cause suicidal thoughts. Mental health professionals believe that SAD may affect 11 million Americans each year, and 25 million more may develop a milder form of the disorder called "winter blues."

Causes

Experts do not know the exact causes of SAD but believe the disorder is related to hormonal changes in the brain that are triggered by certain times of the year. One theory is that less sunlight during the fall and winter months decreases the brain's production of serotonin—a chemical linked to mood regulation—which can cause depression, fatigue, weight gain, and more.

Symptoms

Symptoms of SAD may include fatigue, low energy, oversleeping, suicidal thoughts, changes in appetite, trouble concentrating, increased desire to be alone, loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, and feelings of depression, hopelessness, or worthlessness

"Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths."
- Etty Hillesum

Be Vigilant This Season

Although the holiday season may be a time of joy for most, your Airmen may be struggling. Given the seasonal changes, potential separation from family, and the continued impact of COVID-19, it is critical that Commanders keep a pulse on their people's wellbeing.

Using the list above, assess any changes in mood or behavior and direct struggling Airmen to the proper resources. Schedule virtual or in-person check-ins with your Airmen. Be sure to ask about their wellbeing, as well as that of their families. SAD is most common in young adults so pay particular attention to fledgling Airmen who may not be with their families for the first time this holiday season.

To be vigilant, share the following tips on how to combat SAD!

1. **Be conscious of your schedule.** The holidays can be overwhelming. Don't overbook and don't overwork! Set aside personal time to relax, exercise, and sleep.
2. **Set a routine.** Maintaining a daily schedule improves sleep and decreases overeating, which can alleviate symptoms of SAD.
3. **Be honest about your emotions.** The holidays are typically a time of joy, but don't feel pressure to force yourself to be happy. Take time to process your emotions and discuss them with loved ones.
4. **Tell your loved ones how you'd like to celebrate.** Communicate with friends and family about how you'd prefer to celebrate the holidays to decrease the chances of being in an uncomfortable or stressful environment.
5. **Try light therapy.** The sun sets earlier during the fall and winter months, which can interfere with one's circadian rhythm. Experts find that bright light therapy, also known as phototherapy boxes, mimic sunshine and help manage SAD.
6. **Stay social.** With shorter days and colder temperatures, it is natural for people to remain isolate in their homes. Studies show that prolonged isolation can cause depression and loneliness. Finding creative ways to stay connected with others is key!
7. **Get enough vitamin D.** Experts found that low levels of vitamin D were common in people with SAD. Getting enough sunlight and incorporating vitamin D-rich foods or supplements may help. Consult your doctor to see what's right for you.

Resources



A free, confidential [treatment referral](#) and information service for individuals and families facing mental health and/or substance use disorders.



[Air Force Resilience](#)
Find leadership resiliency tools and resources.



Find a [list of DoD resources](#) and support options related to specific mental health conditions



The [NAMI Helpline](#) is a free service that provides information, referrals, and support to people living with a mental health condition.