

## **“In The Mix” With AOD Episode Eight- Loneliness and Seasonal Affective Disorder**

Welcome back Lakers and Happy New Year! I'm Bethann Long and this is another episode of “In The Mix” With AOD, a podcast provided by the Alcohol and Other Drugs Services right here at Grand Valley. I hope you all had a fun-filled and relaxing winter break and had the chance to spend some time with your family and friends. I know that for me this break was much needed, but I can't believe we're already back for the second semester! Coming back to school and getting back into a routine after a long break can be challenging, and doing this within the cold winter months can be even more challenging. The days are shorter and gloomy with the lack of sun looming over us which can cause many to feel down and have very little motivation. In this episode, we're going to discuss seasonal affective disorder, what causes this to happen, the symptoms that can occur, and ways to help treat it without self-medicating with substances.

Now let's first start with talking about what exactly seasonal affective disorder is and the symptoms that coincide with it. Seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, is when people go through a period of time when they feel sad, or don't feel like themselves, occurring particularly when the seasons begin to change. SAD is considered to be a type of depression and according to the National Institute of Mental Health it's “characterized by its recurrent seasonal pattern, with symptoms lasting about 4-5 months per year.” This is considered to mostly occur during the winter months due to the days getting shorter in the fall and winter which leads people into what many call the “winter blues”. Despite this being mostly common during the winter months, in some cases, individuals may experience depressive episodes during the spring and summer months, which is called summer-pattern seasonal affective disorder or summer depression. Due to seasonal affective disorder being a form of depression, the signs and symptoms include many that are associated with major depression. Some symptoms of major depression may include:

- Feeling depressed most of the day, nearly every day
- Losing interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Experiencing changes in appetite
- Having problems sleeping
- Feeling sluggish or agitated
- Having low energy
- Having difficulty concentrating

Additional specific symptoms associated with winter-pattern SAD may include:

- Oversleeping
- Overeating
- Changes in weight

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- Social withdrawal (feeling like “hibernating”)

Millions of people suffer from seasonal affective disorder, but many may not know that it's this condition causing these symptoms. According to Boston University, “an estimated 10 million Americans suffer from SAD, with women four times more likely to be diagnosed than men.” It's also been shown that people who may develop seasonal affective disorder tend to also struggle with other mental illnesses as well such as ADHD, an eating disorder, or an anxiety or panic disorder.

Now, it's not completely understood by scientists what causes SAD. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, people with seasonal affective disorder may have reduced activity of the brain chemical serotonin which helps regulate our moods. Sunlight is considered to help control the level of molecules that help maintain normal serotonin levels. In people with SAD, this regulation does not function properly—ultimately leading to decreased serotonin levels in the winter. It's also possible that people with SAD tend to produce too much melatonin, a hormone that is central for maintaining the normal sleep-wake cycle, and overproduction can increase sleepiness. In people with seasonal affective disorder, the changes in serotonin and melatonin levels disrupt the normal daily rhythms, leading to many no longer being able to adjust to the seasonal changes in day length, leading to sleep, mood, and behavior changes. It's also been shown that deficits in vitamin D may prolong these problems as this vitamin is believed to promote serotonin activity as well. With less daylight occurring in the winter months, especially in northern states, people with SAD may have lower vitamin D levels which may further harm their serotonin activity.

When it comes to feeling the effects of seasonal affective disorder, many may believe that they can help the symptoms by self-medicating. Some people experiencing a lack of energy may turn to stimulants, or others may want to “numb out” the depression with drugs or alcohol. By turning to substances to self-medicate for seasonal affective disorder, the chances of developing an addiction rise significantly. It may seem like at the moment these coping mechanisms are effective, but the use of alcohol and drugs can actually worsen the symptoms of seasonal affective disorder. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, about 20% of Americans with an anxiety or mood disorder, such as seasonal affective disorder, may also be struggling with substance use and a substance use disorder.

Luckily, seasonal affective disorder is something that has many positive treatments to help ease the symptoms through these long winter months. Relieving these symptoms can take a few different routes and one includes participating in light therapy. This is using a light box for around 45 minutes a day to make up for the diminished natural sunshine in the darker

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months of the year. Personally, this has been a treatment I have taken part in and do see a noticeable difference in my mood and symptoms after sitting in front of this light during the winter. Since seasonal affective disorder is a form of depression, many of the other treatments align with treatments used for major depression. Talk therapy is aimed at helping people learn how to cope with difficult situations, and can help establish a schedule of engaging activities to combat the loss of interest that is experienced in the winter months. Due to the disturbances in serotonin activity, SSRI medications are also a helpful treatment used to combat seasonal affective disorder symptoms. It's important to remember that all medications come with side effects and a talk with your doctor is essential to know the possible risks of using these medications for your symptoms.

During these gloomy times, it's important to ensure that you have something to look forward to when the days seem like they are just passing by. Grand Valley offers a variety of clubs, intramural sports, and daily events to get you out of your living center or apartment and interact with people with similar interests. It's never too late to join a sport or club! It's also important to support yourself through this time and doing what's best for you. Get outside as much as possible for some fresh air and for the moments when the sun decides to peak out, and open the blinds as well. Make sure to get moving! Exercise and simply moving your body in ways that feel good for you can be an essential part of combating SAD symptoms, along with eating a balanced diet full of vitamins, minerals, and nutrients to help decrease the feeling of depression. If you are feeling overwhelmed by these symptoms, be open to leaning on loved ones when possible. You may have the urge to withdraw socially from other people, but it's better to be open to spending time with others and letting them help you when needed.

These months can be unbelievably challenging and lonely to get through, but it's important to remember that you are not alone with feeling this way. Everyday we are gaining about a minute of sunlight and by the time we reach the end of February we will be inching closer to sunsets occurring after 7pm. Now that's something to look forward to and motivate you to keep going! It's important to be taking care of yourself during this time, and to read the cues your body gives you when it's time to rest while still ensuring you are engaging in positive, fun activities. This has been the eighth episode of “In The Mix” with AOD, I am so excited to be back with another semester of episodes for you guys!