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Can spring make depression worse?

While seasonal depression is usually associated with the winter, some people find their symptoms peak in spring. This year, the arrival of sunnier days may pose more challenges than normal.

Most of us are familiar with [seasonal affective disorder \(SAD\)](#), a type of [depression](#) that usually worsens over the winter months. Faced with short days, long nights, and grey skies, SAD sufferers find themselves struggling with low mood and other depressive symptoms. Although the causes aren't fully understood, this condition has been linked to lack of sunlight and its impact on your circadian rhythms.

Unfortunately, the onset of warmer days doesn't bring reprieve for everyone. Some people suffer from a different form of seasonal depression, which peaks over the spring and summer. Sometimes called 'reverse SAD' or 'summer SAD', this may be all the harder to bear for being poorly understood. After all, many people can relate to feeling miserable in winter - but a summer-related depression can be truly isolating.

What causes springtime depression?

"We're still not sure what causes it, but it's thought that the increased heat and humidity in spring and summer can play a role for some people," says Dr Elena Touroni, a consultant psychologist and co-founder of [The Chelsea Psychology Clinic](#). "But also added pressures of having fun in summer can be a trigger. When the sun's out and everyone's busy socialising, it can make someone feel lacking in some way if they don't feel the same way."

Some people may experience disrupted sleep as it gets hotter and lighter - a big factor in depression - while others may grapple with body image difficulties.

Another factor can be [seasonal allergies](#), which are associated with depression and other mood disorders. Some researchers have speculated that this may be due to inflammation. When you have an allergic reaction to pollen, chemicals called cytokines pool in the airways, and can affect the way the brain functions.

Sadly, suicide rates tend to peak in the spring and summer, rather than the winter – a surprising pattern that holds true across [multiple studies](#). Researchers don't know exactly why this might be. But it goes to show that springtime depression should be taken seriously. Depressive symptoms aren't likely to dispel just because it's a sunny day.

Is it SAD or is it depression?

So how do you know if you have reverse SAD, as opposed to depression that just happens to occur in spring? Dr Tourni doesn't think the distinction is that important.

"I think the focus should be less about viewing conditions as 'real' or not, but more about trying to uncover the reasons why someone might be feeling this way. Otherwise, we run the risk of stigmatising someone's emotional experience," she says.

She adds that, while this past year has been difficult for all of us, it's important not to sweep any symptoms of depression under the carpet.

"We're all likely to have felt a rollercoaster of emotions, but these changes in mood are generally more short-term," she says. "Signs to look out for would be any changes that you notice during a longer period of time. Sleeping difficulties, an increase in anxiety levels, feeling more irritable, low mood or no longer finding enjoyment in the things that once brought you pleasure are all warning signs to look out for."

Extra challenges this spring

If you're prone to springtime depression anyway, this year may pose even more challenges than usual. As the UK begins its gradual [route out of lockdown](#), there will be a lot of rhetoric around resuming life as normal. Some people may feel pressurised by this messaging, or may [continue to feel](#) that the world is a treacherous, unsafe place.

During lockdown, we had a sense that everyone was having a tough time, and that if you were feeling low that was normal. As we emerge, there may be a perception that everyone else is having fun, which could be especially detrimental if you're still struggling.

"We went into lockdown with the understanding that it was protecting us from harm," says Dr Touroni. "For those with underlying health conditions, or for those who struggle with [anxiety](#), it might take a while for them to feel safe in the world again. It will be about finding a balance between not pushing yourself prematurely but also not allowing any amplified sense of fear hold you back from living life to the fullest."

What to do if you're struggling

Rest assured – you won't be the only one dealing with mental health challenges this spring. And if you're experiencing any of the telltale signs of depression or anxiety, it's important to recognise there's help available.

You can begin by speaking with your GP (likely via phone consultation), who can refer you on to cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) if appropriate, or may prescribe medication. You can also [refer yourself](#) for NHS counselling, or seek out a private therapist. Some appointments will be conducted over video call for the time being, whereas others may be available face-to-face.

"I would encourage anyone in this position to reach out for help as soon as possible. The sooner you get the right help, the faster your chances of making a speedy recovery," says Dr Touroni.

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