



Out of the darkness

Women who struggle with Seasonal Affective Disorder beginning to see the light

By Cathy Jones

Susan Dunhaupt knew there was something wrong when her daughter, Schuyler, struggled with her grades during the winter each year in middle school.

Starting in late October, Schuyler would lose the motivation to do homework, and it didn't return until March. In high school, she would crave more sleep.

When her son, Martin, was in high school, he too began to have difficulty concentrating during the winter months and noticed himself feeling sluggish and "just not himself."

The signs were all too familiar to

Dunhaupt, a psychotherapist at Associates in Psychiatry and Psychology in Faribault. She suspected her children had Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), a condition she realized she had about 10 years ago.

Dunhaupt had noticed it in herself as she got older and could compare how she felt during winter in Minnesota the past 20-plus years versus living as a young adult in Colorado, which has many more sunny days.

It took her many years to realize it, she said, because as her personal life stabilized and her kids grew older and left the house, there were fewer stressors to blame for her winter fatigue and depression. Then,

it took several years to do anything about it.

"We are in a largely Scandinavian/German culture, which is known for its stoicism and 'pulling yourself up by your bootstrap' mentality," said Dunhaupt, who would just endure knowing that she would feel more like herself by springtime.

Dunhaupt hopes her struggle with SAD can help others who have the disorder or just haven't figured out what is happening to them each winter. She said being diagnosed is just part of the battle. Without it, there can be no treatment.

"There are a plethora of people struggling with this and it helps to know kindred spirits," she said. >>>

What is SAD?

It's not hokum, not the "winter blahs" or "cabin fever," or not due to holiday stress. SAD is a type of depression that has a seasonal component to it, often that coincides with late fall and the increasingly shorter days and lack of sunlight, especially in northern latitudes.

SAD was first defined in 1984 and now affects about 6 percent (mostly women) of the U.S. population.

Some symptoms of SAD include: extreme fatigue, apathy or anxiety; difficulty concentrating; withdrawing socially; oversleeping; and appetite changes, such as craving carbohydrates.

"I feel compelled to go to bed at dusk and have a hard time getting up until the sun's up," Dunhaupt said of her struggle with SAD. "On cloudy days, it's very hard to move through my day at all."

The root of the problem may be related to the balance of chemicals in the brain — such as melato-

nin or serotonin — according to MayoClinic.com.

Melatonin is a sleep-related hormone that has been linked with depression and increases in amount in the winter.

Serotonin is a chemical that affects people's mood, and lack of sunlight can cause its levels to drop, leading to depression.

Researchers are also investigating how the reduced sunlight disrupts people's circadian rhythm, which is the internal "body clock" that tells us when to go to sleep or get up.

A study published in the November online edition of the Journal of Affective Disorders looked at a specific gene that produces a light-sensitive protein found in the retina of people's eyes, which is related to a person's circadian rhythm, hormones and alertness. The study's goal was to identify SAD sufferers who responded well to light therapy, which can be at least partially covered by insurance with a doctor's prescription. >>>

SAD treatments are available

Susan Dunhaupt, a psychotherapist at Associates in Psychiatry and Psychology in Faribault says Seasonal Affective Disorder is treatable.

"The primary thing is to see how you feel related to the gray days," said Dunhaupt, a SAD sufferer herself. "If you don't have a lot of variability in your mood when it's gray, and the sun breaks out and you feel exactly the same, then it's probably not Seasonal Affective Disorder. But if the sun comes out and you're incredibly energized and you feel like you can handle things, then it's an indicator that it's not all the other stressors that are going on in your life."

If you think you are suffering from SAD, your family doctor, local clinic or local mental health center can provide

screening and treatment options — such as sitting or working near a special light box — often at least partially paid by insurance.

Dunhaupt also recommends reading a book called *Winter Blues: Everything You Need to Know to Beat Seasonal Affective Disorder* by Norman E. Rosenthal, as well as *Chemistry of Joy*, written by Northfield's own Henry Emmons.

She says psychotherapy can be a useful tool to alleviate sadness and lethargy as well.

For more information on SAD, see www.mayoclinic.com; www.womenshealth.gov, which is a site maintained by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; and www.nlm.nih.gov, which is the National Library of Medicine Web site.

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