



## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### Changing Seasons Can Impact Your Brain Health

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **Today we are talking about the important role sunlight plays in our brain health.***

Today is the winter solstice — the shortest day of the year. This is also the official start of winter, which can mean a change in mood for the many people who experience seasonal affective disorder, or SAD.

Many of us experience the winter blues. That wistful yearning for long summer days at the beach or on vacation. But SAD is a brain illness, a type of depression that is triggered by spending less time exposed to sunlight. Every fall, people with SAD experience a change in their mood. They may have a marked decrease in energy, experience feelings of hopelessness, or feel worthless, have sleep problems, or experience challenges with attention and concentration, or changes in appetite or weight that continues until the days become longer in the spring. They may also be irritable or anxious and lose interest in their favorite activities.

Those of us who moved to Florida from the great white north may scoff at the idea of having a case of the winter blues here in the Sunshine State, but even Floridians can suffer from SAD. In fact, we get a double whammy when it comes to seasonal depression. Because it is a brain illness triggered by seasonal change and not cold weather or snow, people in Florida may also experience SAD in the spring, as temperatures heat up and we spend more time indoors in the air conditioning.

Luckily, there are effective treatments available for SAD. For example, an increase in physical activity and light therapy, which uses a light box to simulate exposure to the natural sunlight, are both effective at relieving the symptoms.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

*It's important to know the difference between lack of motivation and a brain illness like SAD. If you think you might be experiencing SAD, talk to your doctor. Before prescribing treatment, your doctor will ask you to track your symptoms. Here are the symptoms most often experienced by people with SAD.*

- **Fatigue.** A complete lack of energy for no apparent reason may be your first indication of SAD. People with SAD mention feeling mentally and physically fatigued, and that easy tasks seem completely exhausting.
- **Withdrawal.** A lack of interest in social events, favorite activities, and people that are part of your social life. This may include a loss of attention to activities of daily living, including personal hygiene and physical intimacy.
- **Lack of Focus.** You may have problems remembering things such as appointments and concentrating on a task.
- **Sleep Changes.** People with SAD often experience sudden changes in their sleep routine — ranging from sleeping all the time to difficulty going to sleep or staying asleep.
- **Mood Swings.** You may be suffering from SAD if your mood changes from happy and positive to hopeless and miserable from season to season.
- **Pain.** Some SAD sufferers report new aches and pains without an apparent cause. General pain throughout the body — neck, back, knees, hips, shoulders, headaches, and stomach upset — may be an indication of SAD.
- **Irritability and Anxiety.** Just like other mood disorders, people with SAD ride that emotional rollercoaster of irritability and anxiety, going from tears, to anger, to euphoria. Your anxiety can manifest as mild restlessness to an inability to cope with daily life.
- **Changes in Appetite.** People with SAD often experience sudden and significant weight loss or weight gain. You may also lose all interest in food or turn to food to manage your emotions.
- And don't forget to **BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:
  - Stress resilience
  - Nutrition
  - Physical activity
  - Sleep
  - Social connection
  - Emotional wellbeing
  - Meaning and Purpose
  - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
  - Engaging with nature
  - General health
  - Positive impacts

**About the Brain Health Initiative ([www.brainhealthinitiative.org](http://www.brainhealthinitiative.org))**

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is building brain healthy communities, cultures that foster brain health protective factors and address risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the ***Be Brain Healthy*** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.*** To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).