

Massage and... seasonal affective disorder (S.A.D.)

What is seasonal affective disorder?

Seasonal Affective Disorder (S.A.D.) is a form of depression that affects sufferers in Winter, particularly during the months of December, January and February, when daylight levels are at their lowest.

Seasonal Affective Disorder is generally thought to be related to lack of sunlight. Sunlight plays a vital role in regulating chemical balances in the brain - particularly in the production of the neurotransmitter serotonin. During the winter months, less sunlight means less serotonin is produced, which can lead to a chemical imbalance that causes depression. Another hypothesis is that it is rather related to an excess of melatonin, another chemical that naturally occurs in the body and encourages sleep in low light conditions.

Seasonal Affective Disorder can be a seriously debilitating condition requiring hospitalisation in severe cases and has been linked with suicide, although those with milder cases may experience lack of energy without displaying symptoms of depression.

Seasonal Affective Disorder tends to affect higher proportions of the population the further away from the equator you go - Scandinavians are apparently particularly susceptible. It has also been found that people living in the tropics who subsequently emigrate to countries further away from the equator are more vulnerable to S.A.D.

How can massage help?

Massage has been shown to significantly increase levels of serotonin and endorphins in the body. These feel-good chemicals play an important role in combatting depression and this is one reason why many people tend to feel relaxed and energised after a massage. Massage also reduces levels of stress hormones, such as cortisol, adrenaline and noradrenaline, which helps to reduce anxiety.

Massage stimulates the circulation, which is important where someone may not have been exercising a great deal, as is likely the case with the depressed client.

What else can help?

Light therapy is a common way to treat S.A.D. One of the simplest ways of getting more light exposure is to spend more time outdoors during the day. Ideally this would be combined with exercise, which has a powerful antidepressant effect of its own - going for a walk up a hill, or perhaps by the river or a beach might be one of the best ways you could combat S.A.D. Another popular form of light therapy is use of a light box - a powerful light source that is placed close to the sufferer for up to an hour or so every day - and timed lighting that simulates dawn is used by some. This type of light therapy is generally effective.

Negative air ionisation, which involves a device that releases charged particles into the air while the sufferer sleeps, has been found to be successful with a high proportion. This may also explain why people feel good when they are near rivers or the sea, as water also releases negative ions.

Antidepressants may be useful in combatting S.A.D., but, as with many drugs, I would encourage the use of herbal or homeopathic alternatives, as these can be highly effective but tend to have less side effects and work more in harmony with the systems of the body.

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