

## The Winter Blahs

Our recent snow “blizzard” was beautiful and everybody had a blast playing outdoors all day long. What a treat to help our children build snowmen, have real snowball fights and go sledding---all things we have not done much of in years. What fun to drink hot chocolate while getting warm in front of a roaring fire. Then, the snow mostly melted and life resumed...The wind was cold and bitter, the sun was suddenly gone from sight, and it hit me that the winter blahs were setting in.

I have never been a big fan of old man winter, and except for one good snow a year, I would happily skip the first three months of the year. During the cold, gray days of winter, my mind wanders easily, my temper often seems short, and I find myself just wanting to curl up on the couch and do nothing productive. One thing I do like to do during the winter months is plan my garden...now with the drought, I am not sure how that is going to work out.

They say misery loves company, and that is certainly true if you have a girlfriend who will commiserate with you. My good friend Beth and I have the same conversation every winter about our mood issues and how they directly relate to the dreary weather. A few years ago, we learned there is actually a condition that seemed to describe us.

SAD, or Seasonal Affective Disorder, is a type of winter depression that affects an estimated half a million people every winter, particularly during December, January and February. The experts say the disorder is caused by a biochemical imbalance in the hypothalamus due to the shortening of daylight hours and the lack of sunlight in winter.

I saw on the news the other day that experts say that if you live north of Atlanta, you probably have a lack of vitamin D, due to not getting enough sunlight. Well, I reasoned that we DO live north of Atlanta. Maybe not too far north, but north, nonetheless.

When my husband learned of my self-diagnosis, he said that I am being a bit melodramatic. Since he is originally from northern Maine, where cruel winters are the norm rather than the exception, he considers our winters in Georgia to be about as mild as they are brief. To hear his tales of thirty-foot snow piles and summers where jeans were preferable over shorts, I realize our winters do indeed seem mild. Just the other day our youngest happily wore shorts to school. Out of curiosity, I decided to do some research about SAD anyway.

The symptoms of SAD include sleep problems, lethargy, overeating, depression, social problems, anxiety and mood changes. I went over the list with Beth to see if our SAD qualified. We both remembered the last time we went out to eat Mexican food, and had to admit that we certainly overate that night.

Another statistic I discovered explained that most sufferers with SAD show signs of a weakened immune system during the winter, and was more vulnerable to infections and other illnesses.

In conclusion, my research showed that though there is no cure for SAD, many sufferers experience relief through light therapy. There is an expensive light box you can purchase, or there are actually places that will dispense the intense light therapy. I could not find any such place around here--but there were numerous clinics in the United Kingdom, where SAD seems to flourish.

Doctors recommend for mild sufferers to simply spend time outdoors on sunny days, even if it is cold. The next sunny day we have, even if you do not suffer from SAD, try spending your lunch hour outside. I am keeping my fingers crossed that this winter is going to be mild and brief.