

# Lifestyles

## Change of seasons can bring on depression

By **FANNIE SUNSHINE**  
The Champion

As seasons change, so can people's moods. In the next several weeks, some individuals will start to suffer from a type of depression that follows a seasonal pattern, known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

This disorder usually begins in late autumn and can last until spring, said Priya Rana, executive director of the Halton branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association.

"SAD can be difficult to diagnose, since many of the symptoms

are similar to those of other types of depression or bipolar disorders," she explained. "Even physical conditions, such as thyroid problems, can look like depression. Generally, symptoms that reoccur for at least two consecutive winters, without any other explanation for the changes in mood and behaviour, indicate the presence of SAD."

Symptoms may include change in appetite, in particular a craving for sweet or starchy foods, weight gain, decreased energy, fatigue, tendency to oversleep, difficulty concentrating, irritability, avoidance of social situations and feelings of anxiety and despair, Ms Rana added.

A milder form of SAD, often referred to as the "winter blues," causes discomfort but isn't debilitating, she continued.

"People can really feel blue around Christmas or New Year's if they are recovering from a family disruption or poor financial times. With the winter blues, people can feel down for a variety of reasons and can usually figure out why they feel that way. They might need to get out more or might feel down because their family isn't around."

Although a cause for SAD has yet to be identified, Ms Rana said it's thought to be related to a lack of exposure to light.

"People with mild symptoms can benefit from spending more time outdoors during the day and by arranging their environments so that they receive maximum sunlight. Trim tree branches that block light and keep curtains open during the day and keep blinds open in your office. You can also move furniture so that you sit



Priya Rana

near a window. Installing skylights and adding lamps can also help."

Symptoms of SAD include depression for long periods of time during autumn and winter and change in sleep and appetite patterns, she said.

"SAD may affect some children and teenagers, but it tends to begin in people over the age of 20. The risk decreases with age. The condition is more common in women than men. SAD is not something someone can diagnose for him or herself, so it's best to talk to your physician and find the reasons behind it. If you find yourself thinking about suicide, you should seek professional help."

Ms Rana said a winter vacation to a warm, sunny destination can temporarily relieve SAD symptoms, although they usually reoccur after returning home.

Another way to relieve symptoms involves light therapy, in which a person sits beside a special fluorescent light box for several minutes a day, she continued, adding a health care professional should be consulted before beginning this form of therapy.

For people who are more severely affected by SAD, anti-depressant medications and counselling are other ways of effectively relieving symptoms, Ms Rana said.

The Canadian Mental Health Association provides information about SAD and where and how to seek professional help, she continued.

"It can be confusing when you don't know what it (SAD) is. We support and listen to the individuals who come in. We have the special fluorescent lamp and we can arrange for people to use it. If someone is experiencing the symptoms of SAD, it should definitely be explored because it can really start to negatively affect someone's life."

For more information regarding SAD, call (905) 693-4270.

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## Three cheers for Murray — the fattest dinner guest of all

My family dinners are a strange event.

I don't think about it or notice it much until somebody is there who hasn't been before. Invariably, they end up telling other people about the wacky dinner they had at the Townsends.

These are special occasion dinners that I'm talking about, such as Thanksgiving, Easter and Christmas. You have 15 or more people crowded into the house I grew up in, around a table in a tiny dining room with barely enough room to lift your fork to your mouth, although I've managed fine, thank you.

I think it started about 20 years ago when somebody, probably me, and for no particular reason, decided we should cheer for the people who were our favourites. We'd go around the table one at a time and whoever got the loudest cheer would be the winner.

That was fine, except that my father didn't cheer when it was my mom's turn, and she didn't talk to him for two days. That was it, a tradition was born.

The dinner starts out normally, with small talk around the table. Usually, at that point, I'm too busy eating to pay much attention, except for the year that one of my brothers decided that he would toast just about everyone and everything in sight. When he decided to toast the potatoes I lost



On the  
loose

with MURRAY TOWNSEND

it and food spit out of my mouth. I had to take a break for a minute or two until I stopped laughing.

Toward the end of the meal people start telling their stories. Mostly, they're real-life funny stories, but I usually just make mine up. I often tell the same one, about the miraculous three-legged Easter Pig or Thanksgiving Pig, or whatever occasion it is. It's a long story, but the punch-line is: A great pig like that, you can't eat it all at once.

If you tell a good story and it's new, unlike mine, or if you report doing something special you sometimes get your name chanted.

Invariably, it degenerates into cheering for favourites. By the time this happens, people are making side deals across the table — you cheer for me and I'll cheer for you, type of thing.

When the cheering starts, people are banging the table, hammering their fork on their plate, whistling, and screaming. When it comes to my turn, the tradition is that nobody makes a peep. At least I

hope it's tradition.

I did get some cheers last Christmas, though, when we had those cracker things that you pull apart. Inside is a little prize and a paper hat. Somebody decided that whatever colour hat you had would be your team. All through dinner people were trying to trade their hats to manipulate their chances of winning the vote.

There are different votes, not just for favourites, but the only time I ever won was when they cheered for which person they thought was the fattest.

This Thanksgiving I thought I may have had a chance to win a legitimate vote. I announced that we were going to be cheering for the funniest person. One of my brothers wasn't there — the one who toasts potatoes, gravy and cranberry sauce — and I had a new story, so I was ready.

It was a disaster. Nothing was working. When somebody was talking about how they had been in Arizona, there were a ton of snakes, and how if they lived there they'd want to have roadrunners because they'll kill the snakes and eat them. "Oh," I said, "Maybe you could put up a sign that said: Roadrunners Welcome."

I thought that was pretty funny because roadrunners can't read, but not even a giggle, even after I explained the joke.

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