



Youth Seasonal Affective Disorder by Sarah Roehl

🎵 *Oh mister sun, sun, mister golden sun....please shine down on me.* 🎵

A favorite childhood jingle that's fun to sing begins to sound like a plea as I watch the sun go down. This time of year, the sun seems to forget to set until after I leave work, making each day feel shorter and shorter. As we reflect on all the ways we express gratitude and fill our own buckets, it's equally important to remember the importance of the basics that greatly impacts our health and wellness, rest, nutrition, movement, and sunshine. Here's why less sun exposure can lead you to feeling the "winter blues."

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that follows a seasonal pattern, typically late fall to early spring, when reduced daylight affects the body's internal clock or circadian rhythm. Daylight affects two chemicals in the brain, serotonin and melatonin. When it's sunny, the brain makes more serotonin which boosts feelings of joy and contentment. When it's dark, the brain makes more melatonin, causing you to feel sleepy and have less energy. More hours of darkness make it harder for our brain to release those happy chemicals while serving us an extra dose of "let's just stay in bed." This severely impacts our mood, energy, and behavior and can lead to feelings of depression.

Identifying the signs of SAD in children can be challenging as symptoms may resemble typical developmental changes or other mental health concerns. Young people juggle academic pressures, social expectations, and personal growth. This coupled with SAD can lead to isolation, increased anxiety, and lack of confidence. The following could be indicators of the presence of SAD:

- Withdrawal from friends, family, or activities they once enjoyed
- Increased irritability or frequent conflicts with peers and family members
- Persistent sadness or tearfulness, often without a clear reason
- Higher sensitivity to criticism while more likely to complain, blame, find fault, or see problems more often
- Feelings of hopelessness, guilt, or low self-worth
- Low energy or constant fatigue, even after adequate rest
- Oversleeping or difficulty waking up in the morning
- Changes in appetite, such as cravings for carbohydrates or overeating
- Decline in school performance due to difficulty concentrating or lack of motivation

- Reluctance to participate in social activities or skipping school altogether

By combining practical strategies with emotional support, you can help your child regain balance and resilience.

- Encourage open communication: Create a safe, nonjudgmental space where they feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings.
- Establish a routine: Consistent sleep, meals, and activities help stabilize their internal clock and reduce symptoms. Charge electronics outside their bedroom at night.
- Promote outdoor activities: Encourage time spent outside, even during colder months, to increase sunlight exposure.
- Incorporate physical activity: Regular exercise is a proven mood booster, helping combat lethargy and low energy.
- Educate on SAD: Provide age-appropriate information to help them understand the condition and feel less alone
- Support healthy eating habits: Focus on balanced meals to avoid energy crashes and stabilize mood.
- Involve their social circle: Encourage friends to check in and involve them in group activities when possible.

🎵 *Baby, it's cold outside.* 🎵but bundle up and ensure you're soaking in those rays when you can. Your mind will thank you. ❤️

Resources:

Nemours Kids Health. <https://kidshealth.org>

Houston Behavioral Healthcare Hospital. <https://www.houstonbehavioralhealth.com>

Opioids and Overdose Prevention By Abbe Edgecombe

Research shows that parents and guardians play a critical role in youth substance use prevention. Open and ongoing conversations are a primary defense against substance use and can prevent accidental misuse, addiction, overdose, and even death. Opioids are the leading cause of drug overdose deaths in the United States (CDC). Opioids are highly addictive and include both prescription medications like Oxycodone used to treat pain and illegal drugs like heroin. Synthetic opioids, primarily illegally made fentanyl, contribute to a vast majority of the overdose fatalities. According to CDC, many adolescents who fatally overdose do not have a known history of a substance use problem. The extreme potency of fentanyl means even experimental or first-time use can be fatal.

Proactive conversations about opioids, including counterfeit pills and other substances that may contain lethal amounts of fentanyl, can help protect youth by providing them with factual information about the serious health risks and extreme danger of illicit opioids, including the risk of overdose and death. Open and honest dialogue can also be a powerful factor in fostering supportive environments that encourage youth to ask questions or seek out help.

Learning about opioids helps parents and guardians identify trustworthy resources for prevention, treatment, and crisis support if the need arises. Stop Overdose Nebraska is one such resource. They recently launched a new landing page on their website dedicated to providing parents and guardians with essential information on overdose prevention and intervention. There you will find expert advice, real life experiences, stories of survival and valuable resources including how to access NARCAN, a fast-acting drug that can save someone who is experiencing an opioid overdose. A guide on how to start a conversation with youth about opioids and overdose prevention can also be found on the resource page. To learn more visit <https://stopodne.com/parents/>.

References: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; National Institute of Drug Abuse; National Institute of Health; Stop Overdose Nebraska

Holiday Stress By Tessah Fulk

The holiday season often brings visions of cozy gatherings with family and friends, festive celebrations, cherished traditions, festive decorations, elaborate meals, sweet treats, music and movie classics, and the excitement of giving and receiving gifts. Yet beneath all the excitement and anticipation, many youth also fight with stress and anxiety as the holidays and winter break approach. Let's take a closer look at what drives these feelings and how we can best support them during this time.

The holiday season is often seen as a time to welcome friends and family, but for some youth, this period is more complex and can be uncomfortable. Family conflicts may arise when children spend extended time with relatives whom they may feel uneasy around or when they are adjusting to changes in family structure, such as a recent divorce, remarriage, or the introduction of stepfamily members. Predetermined holiday schedules mandated by a court may leave some children's preferences ignored. Splitting time between parents' homes can leave a child feeling caught in the middle of ongoing tension and even responsible for maintaining peace. To support our youth, allow open conversations where they can express concerns and ask questions. Set boundaries for both you and the child and model healthy conflict-resolution skills.

Furthermore, youth who have experienced a recent loss of a family member and/or friend may feel intensified grief during the holidays, making emotional support especially important. Remember to support your youth and have frequent check-ins.

For students and families facing financial challenges or food insecurity, consider exploring local food pantries, church programs, and community organizations that offer meals, holiday assistance, and essential items. Families should be encouraged to discuss realistic gift lists and set clear and affordable expectations. Create a budget for gifts, food, and travel expenses. Limit social media usage to reduce negative social comparisons. Take advantage of free/ low-cost holiday excursions. And remember the holiday season is about valued time with loved ones and not material goods. Below is a link for foodbanks around the state.

Help prepare your student for end of semester finals and grades. Speak early about current grades and expectations. Set realistic goals for students hoping for drastically large grade improvements. Promote healthy habits: staying hydrated, eating regular meals, light exercise, and getting adequate sleep. Provide emotional support, encouragement, and acknowledge the effort they've put in throughout the semester. Help create a realistic study plan. School personnel can support students by providing the proper resources: tutoring options, a calm study environment, pre-organized study groups, extended office hours, and necessary study materials.

Supporting youth with social anxiety during holiday gatherings can be difficult, but it is possible. Beforehand, speak to your youth about who will be present at the event or gathering and provide an estimate for how long it will last. Prepare and practice coping techniques. Support your youth with introductions, difficult interactions, and complete check-ins in private during the gathering. If your youth is too overwhelmed by extensive plans, offer compromises or input in which activities they'll like to participate in.

If your youth is experiencing an eating disorder, the holiday season might feel like a trap. A Center for Change recommends shifting the focus away from food and on valued time with loved ones, avoid conversations about diets, weight loss/ gain, allow time for activities that do not involve food, and preparing a dish the youth will eat. More resources can be found at Center for Change, [Coping With A Loved Ones' Eating Disorder During the Holidays](#).

Changing routines such as school breaks can cause disruptions in a youth's normal schedule, affecting sleep, meal routine, and general daily structure. This lack of predictability can result in increased anxiety, especially in our younger youth. Despite the break from the regular schedule, it's recommended to maintain regular mealtimes, bedtimes, and to keep the youth busy.

As described, for youth who are experiencing family conflict, grief, or living in households affected by financial hardship and limited access to regular meals, the holiday season can bring heightened stress, anxiety, and uncertainty. Academic pressures and end-of-semester finals may further disrupt sleep, lower self-esteem, and contribute to burnout. Students coping with depression, eating disorders, or anxiety disorders, including social anxiety, may feel overwhelmed by holiday gatherings and the unpredictability that this time of year often brings. As parents and educators, we can do our part to support our youth during this season.