

HEALTHCARE PROFILES 2025

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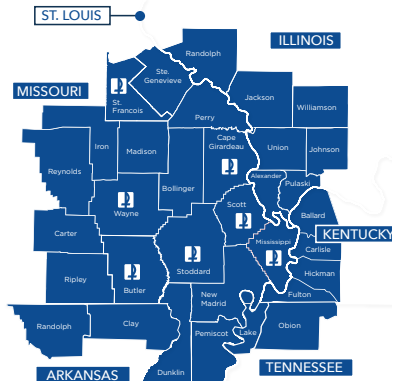
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WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

There's much to look forward to when winter begins. Outdoor enthusiasts may relish a return to the slopes to ski or snowboard each winter, while others praise the crisp fresh air and lack of insects as more conducive to activities like hiking.

Winter indeed has plenty to offer, but some people find that less daylight has an adverse effect on their mood. The National Institutes of Mental Health notes that shifts in mood and behavior that align with changes in the seasons could be indicative of seasonal affective disorder, also known as SAD.

WHAT IS SAD?

Johns Hopkins Medicine characterizes SAD as a form of depression in which individuals' mood and behavior change when the seasons change. The NIMH notes SAD is sometimes referred to as the "winter blues."

IS SAD EXCLUSIVE TO WINTER?

Though SAD can affect people at any time of year, the NIMH reports that most cases of SAD start to affect people in late fall or early winter before symptoms begin to subside during the spring and summer. Johns Hopkins Medicine notes researchers believe the shorter days and thus fewer hours of daylight that

occur each winter set off a chemical change in the brain that leads to a person experiencing symptoms of depression.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

The NIMH points out that, since SAD is a type of depression, symptoms of the condition include those associated with depression. Such symptoms include:

- A persistent sad, anxious or "empty" mood most of the day. This occurs every day for at least two weeks.
- Feelings of hopelessness or pessimism
- Feelings of irritability, frustration or restlessness
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness or helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities
- Loss of energy or feelings of fatigue. Some also feel as if they have slowed down.
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Changes in sleep or appetite or unplanned weight changes
- Physical aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems that have no explanation and do not subside even after treatment
- Suicidal thoughts or attempts or thoughts about death

- It's important to note that the above are symptoms of depression that people with SAD may experience. Additional symptoms of winter-pattern SAD include:
 - Hypersomnia, or oversleeping
 - Overeating that leads to weight gain. The NIMH notes people with SAD may have a particular craving for carbohydrates.
 - Social withdrawal

HOW IS SAD TREATED?

People who suspect they have SAD are urged to speak with their physicians. Various treatments, including light therapy, psychotherapy or antidepressant medications, can help to treat SAD. Individuals may also be prescribed vitamin D supplements.

CAN I PREVENT SAD?

The NIMH notes that since SAD is tied to seasonal changes, people can take steps in an effort to prevent it. Starting treatments prior to a change in seasons may help.

Many people experience difficulty when fall transitions to winter, and such troubles may be attributable to SAD. More information about SAD is available at www.nimh.nih.gov.

HEALTHY WAYS TO COPE WITH STRESS

Stressful experiences are a part of life, and the physiological responses that occur in response to these challenges are natural tools humans developed as survival mechanisms. People learn and grow as they deal with positive stressful occurrences, such as when speaking in public or taking a test. But when stressors cannot be avoided or prove chronic, the body's response to stress can take a toll on a person's mental and physical well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic, inflation, an uptick in strong storms and subsequent weather-related disasters, and global conflicts have proven stressful for people around the world. According to a report from the American Psychological Association titled "Stress in America 2023: A Nation Recovering from Collective Trauma," the long-term stress sustained since early 2020 has had a significant impact on well-being, as evidenced by an increase in chronic illnesses. The report found people between the ages of 35 and 44 have been particularly affected.

Long-term stress poses many health risks, including wear and tear on

the immune system and an increase in worry, anxiety and irritability. Some people turn to drugs or alcohol to combat stress, but there are healthy options. The following are better ways to cope with stress.

- **Reduce the number of stressors.** It is not possible to remove all of the stress of life, but people can try to reduce some forms of stress. Think about sharing some responsibilities or asking for help. If a person is causing you stress, then distance yourself from this person as much as possible. Work is a major source of stress for many people. Finding a new job or cutting back on tasks could help.

- **Get quality sleep.** Prioritize sleeping better and longer. Fatigue can exacerbate the ability to deal with even minor stressors, leaving you more irritable and edgy. Most adults require between seven and nine hours of sleep per night, so adjust your schedule to achieve this.

- **Plan for daily exercise.** The APA says brisk movement improves sleep and can combat stress. In one study titled "Relationships between Leisure Time Physical

Activity and Perceived Stress," first published in 1996, researchers found that working adults who engaged in moderate physical activity had half the perceived stress when compared to working adults who did not participate. A 30-minute session each day can work wonders.

- **Engage in pleasurable activities.** It's easy to drop fun things from the schedule when stress is high. But the Cleveland Clinic advises making time for pleasurable things as a means to combatting stress. Laughter and humor can go a long way towards reducing stressful feelings, so a night out at a comedy show or watching a funny movie can help.

- **Improve your diet.** Well-nourished bodies can handle stressors, illnesses and life in general much easier. Aim for a well-balanced diet that is low in processed foods and sugar. Avoid alcohol, caffeine and nicotine, as each can worsen stress in the long run, according to Sutter Health.

Stress is a natural part of life. When stress becomes too much to take, individuals can cope in various healthy ways.

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7 WAYS TO REDUCE STROKE RISK

Stroke is a serious medical condition that results from impaired blood flow to the brain, the consequences of which can be trouble with mobility, speech complications, lack of muscular control, and even death. UTMB Health indicates stroke is the fifth leading cause of death in the United States, but up to 80 percent of all strokes are preventable. These seven strategies can help individuals reduce their risk for stroke.

1. Lower your blood pressure, as hypertension can double or even quadruple stroke risk if it is not controlled. Harvard Health says high blood pres-

sure is the biggest contributor to the risk of stroke in both men and women.

2. Keep a healthy weight, as being overweight or obese increases risk for stroke, says the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

3. If you smoke, quit. Smoking can lead to hardening of the arteries that can make it more difficult for blood to flow to the brain, according to the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

4. Exercising can help lower blood pressure and keep weight in check, but Harvard Health says it also stands on its own as a method for reduc-

ing stroke risk. Reach a rate of exercise that involves breathing hard but still being able to talk.

5. If you drink alcohol, keep it to no more than one to two drinks per day. After which, increased drinking elevates stroke risk sharply.

6. Control cholesterol levels, and have your cholesterol checked at least once every five years, says the CDC.

7. Manage your atrial fibrillation. Afib is an irregular heartbeat that can cause the formation of clots in the heart. These clots can then make their way to the brain. Afib increases stroke risk significantly.

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WALK YOUR WAY TO BETTER OVERALL HEALTH

People turn to many different exercises and pieces of fitness equipment to get in shape and lose weight. What they may not realize is that one of the most effective health strategies requires no additional gear except a quality pair of athletic shoes. Walking is one of the easiest and most accessible activities that can improve overall health. In fact, walking is now being touted as “the closest thing we have to a wonder drug,” according to Dr. Thomas Frieden, former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Indeed, walking offers a host of benefits, including:

- Reduces the risk of developing breast cancer by as much as 14 percent, according to the American Cancer Society.
- Helps a person maintain a healthy weight and lose body fat.
- Improves cardiovascular fitness by strengthening the heart.
- Improves muscle endurance.
- Helps to prevent or manage conditions like stroke, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and type 2 diabetes, according to the Mayo Clinic.
- Boosts immune function to make a person less sus-

ceptible to common viruses like the cold and flu.

- Eases joint pain associated with arthritis, and can even prevent osteoarthritis from developing in the first place, according to Harvard Health.
- Helps tame cravings for sweets and other fattening or sugary foods.

The faster and more frequently a person walks, the greater the benefits. One also can alternate periods of leisurely walking with brisk walking as a form of interval training to burn more calories and improve cardiovascular fitness.



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COMMON EXERCISE INJURIES AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

Routine exercise is one of the pillars of a healthy lifestyle. Daily physical activity can help fend off a host of issues that can adversely affect quality of life and long-term health. But exercise carries the possibility of injury, and avoiding injuries involves both recognition of that risk and knowledge of what can be done to avoid issues that can sideline individuals looking to physical activity as a means to staying healthy.

SHOULDER INJURIES

The National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases notes that exercises and sports that involve repetitive motion can contribute to various shoulder injuries. For ex-

ample, an impingement can occur when the top of the shoulder blade applies pressure to the soft tissue beneath as the arm is lifted. Swimming is a highly effective and beneficial exercise, but the NIAMS notes it can increase the risk for impingement. The Cleveland Clinic notes that shoulder impingements may be classified as rotator cuff tendinitis, shoulder bursitis or acromion deformity, while adding that impingements are estimated to be responsible for around half of all instances of shoulder pain. Shoulder impingement prevention strategies include warming up and cooling down prior to exercising. Such an approach can loosen muscles and prepare them for

exercise. In addition, the Cleveland Clinic advises wearing the right attire for exercise and urges individuals to stop exercising the moment they feel pain. If pain persists, visit a health care provider before exercising again.

ELBOW INJURIES

Elbow injuries also are common among individuals who engage in activities that require repetitive use. Such injuries may include tennis elbow, which is caused by the development of small tears in the tendons of the elbow that can wear them down and result in painful inflammation, and golfer's elbow, which begins with pain in the inner part of the elbow but can



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spread to the forearm and wrist. The names of such injuries suggest tennis players and golfers are particularly vulnerable to them, but various physical therapy experts note that repetitive activities such as weightlifting can contribute to these conditions as well. Orthopedic professionals emphasize the importance of stretching arm and hand muscles regularly to reduce the risk of elbow injuries. In addition, avoiding overuse, which can happen when physically active individuals do not incorporate off days into their workout regimens, can help to reduce risk for elbow injuries.

KNEE INJURIES

The NIAMS notes that the joints are particularly susceptible to injury since so much is asked of them, particularly during physical activities. So it's no surprise that knee injuries join issues affecting the shoulders and elbows among the concerns physically active individuals must be aware of. According to the NIAMS, a torn anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) can occur when the knee is overextended or twisted, while runner's knee affects runners, hikers and cyclists and causes pain or tenderness under the kneecap or at the front of the knee. Torn ACLs might be

most associated with physically active individuals who play sports like soccer and basketball, but improper form while lifting weights also can put stress on the knee, potentially leading to a tear in the ligament. Johns Hopkins Medicine recommends various strategies to individuals hoping to reduce their risk for runner's knee, including stretching before and after physical activity and running leaning forward with knees bent.

Physical activity is vital to long-term health, but individuals must be aware of injuries that can arise during physical activity and what can be done to prevent them.



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