



January 2010

Is Seasonal Affective Disorder Impacting Your Workplace?

For many of us, these are the longest days of the year. The holidays are behind us, it's cold, it's dark, and spring is still too far off to fairly say it is only around the corner.

While nearly everyone tends to go through a degree of "winter blahs" at some point between November and April, two to three per cent of our population is vulnerable to a condition known as **Seasonal Affective Disorder**, or SAD, which is similar in many ways to depression.

Affecting an estimated 6% of the U.S. population, SAD can actually cause a great deal of distress and difficulties in functioning, both at work and in one's personal life. Not to be confused with a diagnosis of depression, SAD is a mood disorder associated with depressive episodes and related to seasonal variations of light.

While research and awareness of this condition is still somewhat limited, we do know that SAD is related to decreased sunlight during the winter months and that it generally affects adults in their 20s and 30s up until the mid-50s.¹

SAD Symptoms

According to the U.S. Office of Disability Policy's Job Accommodation Network (JAN), common symptoms of SAD include:

- Depression/Changes in Mood
- Fatigue or loss of energy and oversleeping
- Overeating
- Lack of sex drive
- Anxiety and increased irritability
- Difficulty concentrating or processing information
- A craving for sugary/starchy foods
- Changes in Sleeping Patterns

These symptoms must be regularly occurring during the fall and winter months, and must also be present for two years prior to diagnosis. Most people deny these symptoms in the spring and summer months.

What impact does seasonal affection disorder have in the workplace?

People experiencing seasonal affective disorder may also present tendencies toward another mental health disorder. It is important to note that SAD is not recognized by psychiatric professionals as a distinct disorder; it is diagnosed as a type of depression.

If an employee has been clinically diagnosed with SAD, you might be required to provide a reasonable accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Solutions and Treatments

Exacerbated by wintry gray skies and poor indoor lighting, SAD is usually treated with light therapy. The affected individual spends a period of time each day exposed to high-intensity bright lights, typically referred to as light boxes or sun boxes. Many of these light boxes are portable and can be placed on a desk or table in the work environment.

Four basic light products that may be used to accommodate workers with SAD:

Light boxes: Rectangular light fixtures that have several fluorescent tubes that produce between 5,000 and 10,000 lux and come in many different sizes and styles.

Light visors: Head-mounted light sources that resemble tennis visors and are good choices for people who do not have sedentary jobs or who need to be mobile during the day.

Desk lamps: Resemble typical office lamps.

Dawn simulators: Devices that mimic natural sunrises by gradually brightening rooms over programmed periods of time.

Upcoming Events

2010 Training for Drug Free Workplaces

2 Hour Initial Training

Wednesday, February 3, 2010

Time: 8am - 10am

Cost: \$34/person

1 Hour Annual Update

Thursday, February 4, 2010

Time: 8am - 9am

Cost: \$22/person

Location: Medical Class Staffroom,
Gerard Hall, Allen College

For more information contact:
Tara Wait at waittr@ihs.org or call
319-235-5043

First Aid & CPR Training

Friday, Feb. 5, 2010

Location: Medical Class Staffroom,
Gerard Hall, Allen College

Times: 8am - 1pm First Aid & CPR
Cost \$52.50/person

8am- 10am CPR only
Cost \$26.50/person

For more information contact:
Marlys Nelson at nelsonmj@ihs.org
or

Ann Doeden at doedenam@ihs.org.
They can also be reached at:
319-235-3523

To Register:

Visit

www.allenocchealth.com
and click on the link of the lower
right hand corner of the screen.

Case Study for SAD: A Natural Accommodation

Providing natural light could also be a reasonable workplace accommodation for employees with SAD. A school district's failure to see natural light as a reasonable accommodation option landed it in court and subsequently, charged with failure to accommodate in violation of the ADA.

Facts of the case: When a teacher was moved to a classroom lacking exterior windows, she told the principal that she had SAD and would have difficulty functioning in a room without natural light. She repeatedly requested a room with natural light, but she never received one. Another teacher was willing to switch with her and there was an empty classroom being held open for a possible additional class which could have accommodated her need. The school district seemed to do thing which exacerbated her SAD symptoms, such as noise distractions and inadequate ventilation. The teacher's health began to deteriorate, and she went out on disability leave as recommended by her doctor, who wrote a letter to the school district explaining that natural light would be the key variable to the teacher being able to return to work.

In allowing the teacher's ADA claim to proceed, an appeals court ruled: "Once aware of natural light's medical necessity to [the teacher], and having been informed...that she was willing and able to return to work in a classroom with natural light, the school district was obligated to provide [her] specifically requested, medically necessary accommodation unless it would impose an undue hardship on the school district." Providing the teacher with an available classroom with exterior windows would have imposed "little hardship." At most, the school would have experienced costs associated with moving items and making any necessary readjustments. (Ekstrand v. School District of Somerset, 7th Cir., No. 09-1853, 2009)

Lessons learned: ADA lawsuits based on SAD are rare, but this case goes to show that SAD can be considered a qualifying disability that must be reasonably accommodated, absent an undue hardship. Take a true look at the cost of moving an employee to a location with natural light. A mere one-time inconveniencing of other employees who have to move too would not likely render the accommodation as unreasonable; it might be a hardship if the monetary expense would be great or if it would cause a permanent adverse effect on production. If a location change is not feasible, look into JAN's suggested light products. ²

How Can an Employee Assistance Program Help?

A good employee assistance program (EAP) will provide services tailored to the needs of people experiencing seasonal affective disorder. Through their offerings, employees have access to professional counselors who work with other healthcare professionals to ensure sufferers receive the support they need.

Where it is deemed the appropriate type of treatment, counselors can offer emotional support and work on-on-one with employees to help them develop strategies to manage their symptoms and improve their overall quality of life. Individuals showing symptom should be encouraged to visit their doctor and in some cases be referred to their EAP for assessment.

Allen's Employee Assistance Program

Professional Expertise and Decreased Absenteeism

- Confidential, free professional assessment, counseling and referral services for employees and their immediate family member
- Complimentary Supervisory Training on how to identify and deal with the under functioning employee.
- Ongoing consultation and support for management of troubled employees
- 24-hour HELP-line offers weekend and after hours crisis coverage.
- Counselors address employee problems in a timely manner so that employees can return to work more productively.

Controlled Healthcare Costs and Improved Employee Retention

- Assessing EAP services first helps to decrease mental health/chemical dependency utilization and healthcare insurance claims/premiums.
- Decrease emergency room utilization for crisis situations.
- Increased employee morale and loyalty reduces employee turnover, recruiting, and training costs.

CALL Stephanie Lawrence, Allen's EAP Coordinator at 319-235-3550 for more information.

BIBLIOGRPAHY:

1. Standard Life, *Health & Wellness Centre*, www.standardlife.com
2. Alexander Hamilton Institute, *Workplace Accommodations For Seasonal Affective Disorder*, 2009