



Summertime blues

It's commonly associated with winter, but seasonal affective disorder also strikes when the sun is high

Lazy days spent idling in the sun, dining al fresco, enjoying easy conversation with friends in a pretty beer garden – these summer pursuits hardly sound like the stuff of nightmares. But for many the season of linen shorts, strappy dresses and jazzy flip-flops is the harbinger of irritability, discomfort and gloom. Why? Seasonal affective disorder, or SAD. It's more commonly associated with winter, when those affected experience an onset of lethargy and low mood as the autumn days begin their descent into darkness. Less obvious are those who take comfort in those same grey days and cool temperatures, relieved that the heat and sunlight have dispersed.

Clinically speaking, SAD refers to seasonal patterns in those diagnosed with serious depressive or bipolar disorders, although it is widely used as an umbrella term referring to a milder form of seasonal blues. Psychiatrist Norman Rosenthal is credited with giving SAD its name in the 1980s, but scholarly observations of a melancholy triggered by changing seasons date from the 6th century.

Light touch

As with the winter condition, those who experience summer (or reverse) SAD, describe feelings of isolation, hopelessness and a lack of motivation. Other symptoms also include appetite loss, anxiety, agitation and allergies. This is often compounded by summer snaps on social media and the seemingly incessant let's-look-for-the-sun weather reports. In fact, much like the commercial hype around Christmas, the pressure to conform, to join in and to enjoy can seem almost inescapable.

Holistic therapist Nicky Harris, from Shropshire, is among those who experience the summer malady. 'My symptoms start with the anxious feeling in my stomach as early as 21 December, the winter solstice, because I know then that the days are getting longer,' she says. 'By the time the clocks go forward I could cry, I feel sick, I can't sleep and I get quite depressed. I won't change the time on the clocks in the house, I close the blinds at around 7pm because I can't bear that much

light any longer. I tend to go to the cinema more in the summer, because it's dark. I instantly feel more relaxed in the dark.'

Nicky had no idea reverse SAD existed until it was suggested by her GP during a routine appointment one summer. 'When I mentioned that I hated the season and the light nights, she looked at me and said she was exactly the same and also disliked the heat and the sun. We chatted and she said it sounded like I had reverse SAD. I was relieved it wasn't just me.'

In the US, around 0.5 per cent of the population has been diagnosed, while in the UK it is around one per cent – some 650,000 people. Since the condition is largely unrecognised, however, it is thought there could be more people suffering in silence, perhaps unaware that the disorder even exists.

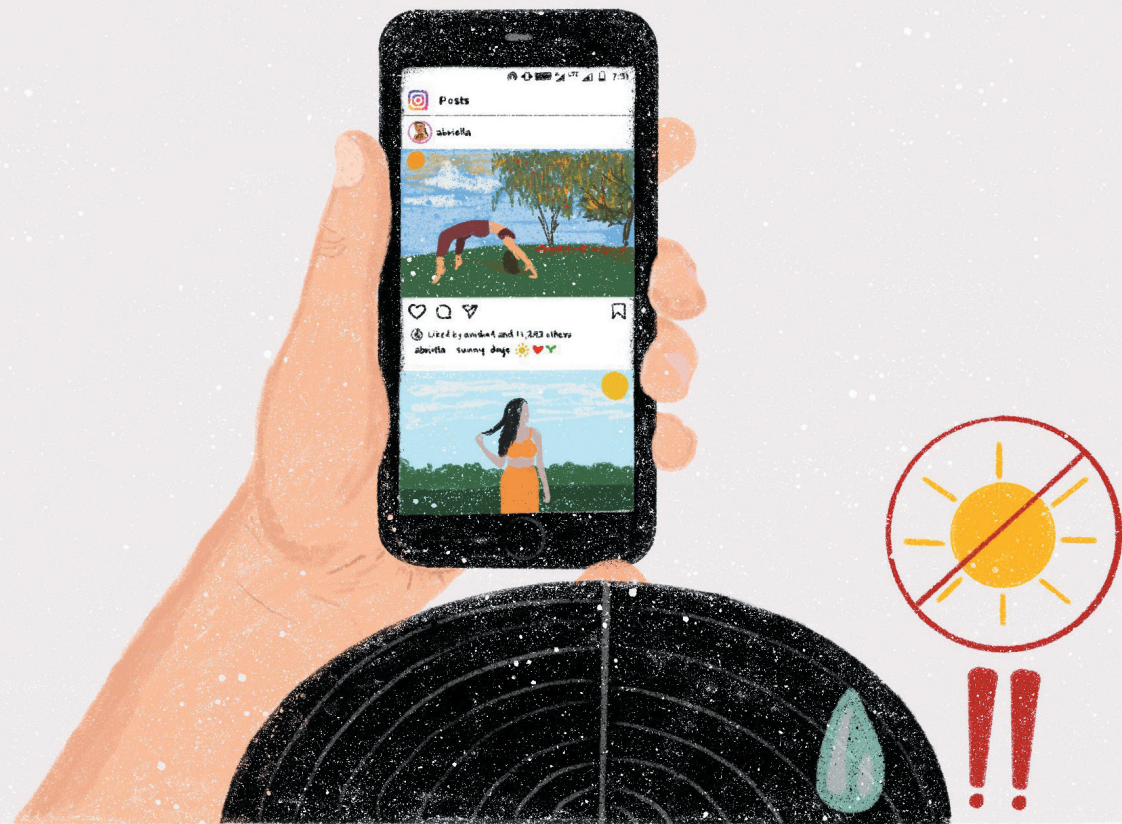
Lance Workman, a visiting professor of psychology at the University of South Wales, has a specialist interest in SAD. He says: 'We need to bear in mind that, like winter SAD, a lot of people who don't reach the criteria for diagnosis are on a spectrum whereby a much larger proportion of society have problems with summer than the estimated one per cent. Perhaps as many as 10 per cent will have some degree of negative mood change during the summer months. So, having a degree of summer SAD is pretty common.'

Experts believe differing light levels, responsible for producing the so-called happy hormone serotonin, are to blame for the mood-shifting seasonal patterns. For some, short winter days might result in decreased levels, and consequently low energy and mood, whereas it is thought reverse SAD is caused by too much light, resulting in nervous energy and tiredness.

'Reverse SAD sufferers certainly are more distracted than their winter counterparts,' says Lance. 'One reason might be because of the supposed increase in serotonin levels. Sunlight does increase serotonin production, which is a good thing if levels are too low as it tends to give us a lift, but if you have too much circulating it can lead to irritation and distraction.'

It is thought the disruption to serotonin levels can also affect the production of the sleep hormone melatonin. Unlike its





light-junkie counterpart, the latter relies heavily on darkness for its production, and if the two are out of sync it can cause chaos to the body's internal clock.

In the years following Rosenthal's coining of the term SAD, studies conducted into the summer condition identified heat as another likely trigger. In one, fellow psychiatrist Thomas Wehr discovered that participants, cooled with a reverse thermal blanket, reported an improvement in mood, but this quickly deteriorated once they returned to the summer heat. Other research has suggested people in countries located closer to the equator are more likely to experience reverse SAD.

Support network

There is also that inexorable lure of social media hinted at earlier, which can seem to ramp up in the summer when newsfeeds sizzle with the sunny exploits of others. Positive psychology practitioner Janice Crompton Brough, who runs alternative and holistic health service Pu Tai Wellbeing in Warwickshire, says: 'The idea is that, particularly during the summer months, we see people looking great and having fun. And the pressure to compete, fit in, to experience what we think other people are experiencing can have a negative effect on self-esteem and confidence. But what we see on social media is only the stuff people want us to see, it's not the whole picture. Focus on what makes you happy and the people and causes that mean most to you.'

She shares a personal mood-boosting tactic for those low moments: 'Create a SAD box for days when you are feeling really low – in mine I have a paper heart given to me by a friend who wrote: "I wouldn't be half the woman I am without my friends." I love this and it reminds me when I am feeling low that I do have friends, and yes, I am a good friend. It is a beautiful, uplifting message. You can include pictures of happy times,

shared memories, positive affirmations, quotes and even dress-up items. Anything that feels uplifting to you.'

For people like holistic therapist Nicky, empathy can be hard to come by. 'I do get annoyed with people who dismiss my condition. When I say I find spring and summer depressing I often get stared at like I've suddenly sprouted horns. I typically get told to "man up" and "stop being so stupid"; she says.

Janice suggests it can be helpful to connect with trustworthy friends who enable you to relax while not completely isolating yourself. 'Find people who are happy in themselves, happy to accept you just as you are – no judgment. Create a support network so you have someone to talk to, to share with, who will listen without trying to fix you. This can help take the pressure off you trying to act normal when you may be feeling anything but. Connecting with nature is also important. Perhaps contact a friend and schedule moon walks or go out at dusk. It will be a little darker, a chance to work off some extra energy if you're feeling buzzed and an opportunity to relax.'

What's important to remember is that the clamouring festival crowds, barbecue afternoons and romantic trysts popularised by the media are just summer ideals and like the sunny scenes dominating newsfeeds they represent glossy vignettes of a wider, more complicated and nuanced reality. Just as some might relish serving up al-fresco treats or basking by the pool, others might find uplifting moments during a movie matinée or a moonlit walk. There are no rules when it comes to self-kindness and compassion – whatever the weather.

Words: Cat Thompson

If you or someone you care about has symptoms of SAD, please see your GP. For more information, visit mind.org.uk.



STRATEGIES FOR TACKLING REVERSE SAD

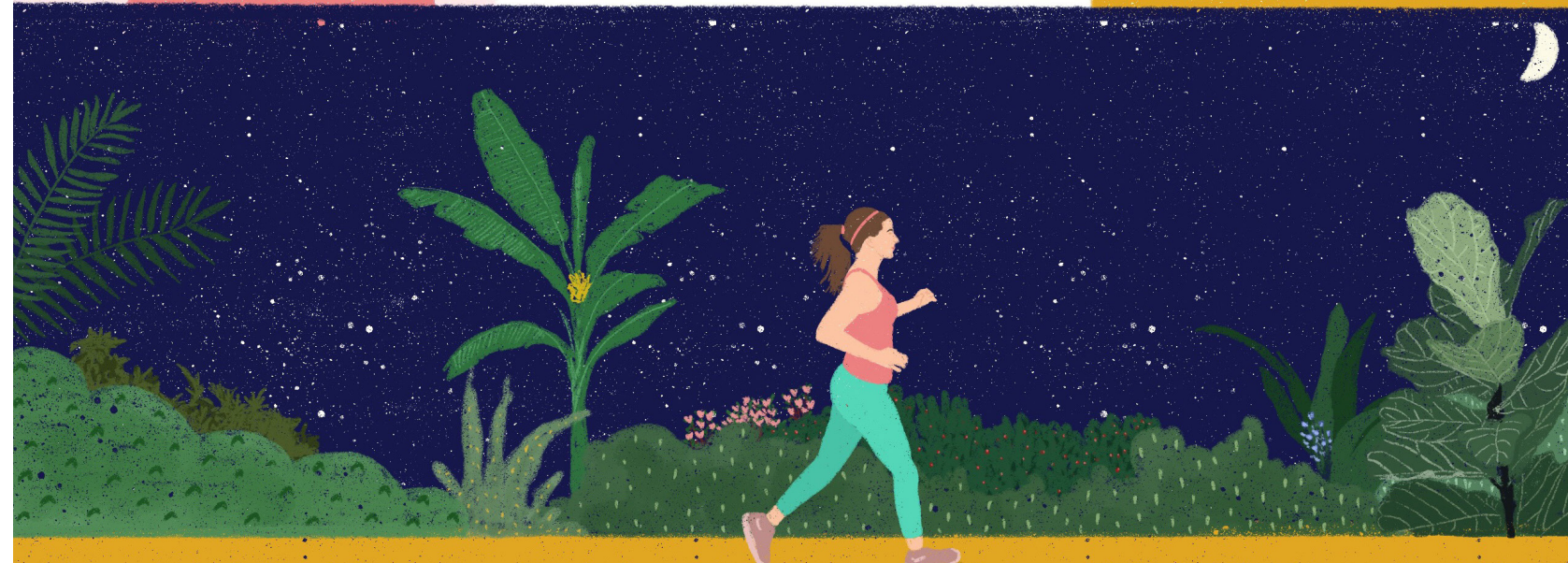
Take it seriously. There are a number of ways, including cognitive behavioural therapy, to treat the condition. A discussion with your GP is one way to explore all the options available.

Manage your environment. Use a blackout blind or line your curtains to minimise the daylight filtering in (an eye mask might also help), choose cool bed linen and consider buying a fan to stay cool.

Think about your sleep. Janice suggests that a technique known as neuro-linguistic programming can help some people to relax before sleep. She says: 'Focus on how you'd like to feel (deeply relaxed) and not what you don't want, removing the idea of not sleeping, to simply, relaxing.'

Breathe. Breathing deeply can help lower cortisol and adrenaline at times of irritability. Janice suggests box breathing: inhaling, holding it, then exhaling, each to the count of four.

Exercise. Lance advises staying indoors during the hottest part of the day but try not to sit still all day. Take an early-morning or late-evening stroll to ensure your health and fitness don't suffer.



ILLUSTRATIONS: ANKITA MANUJIA