

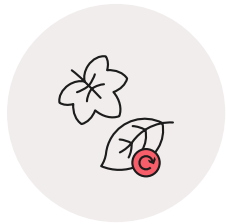
Low mood, no energy, can't focus? It could be seasonal or something more

As autumn sets in and daylight hours shrink, **many people notice a dip in mood**. Feeling sluggish, unmotivated, or irritable can seem like a natural reaction to colder, darker days. But for some, the change is stronger, creeping into daily life and making it difficult to focus, socialise, or even get out of bed.

This change can be linked to **seasonal affective disorder (SAD)**, a form of depression triggered by seasonal shifts in daylight. For others, it may highlight an **ongoing low-grade depression** that becomes harder to manage as routines and light exposure change. Understanding what's happening is the first step in deciding what to do.

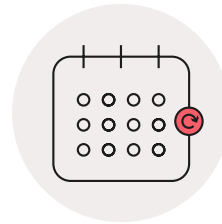
What's the difference between SAD and low-grade depression?

While SAD and persistent low-grade depression share many symptoms, there are important differences that can guide treatment.



SAD

This **condition tends to return at the same time each year**, usually starting in autumn or winter and lifting in spring or summer. The main trigger is reduced daylight, which disrupts the body's circadian rhythm, affects serotonin levels, and can increase melatonin production. These changes alter mood, sleep, and energy.



Low-grade depression

(also known as persistent depressive disorder or dysthymia)

This is longer lasting, with **symptoms that stretch over years**. They may not follow a seasonal pattern, but they still affect motivation, energy, and focus. Because symptoms are often milder than major depression, people may delay seeking help, even though the impact on life can be significant.

It's possible to experience both. Someone with persistent depression may find their symptoms worsen in autumn and winter, creating a layered effect.





Signs it might be more than a bad week

Everyone has days when they feel flat or run-down, but depression lasts longer and is harder to shake off. The following signs suggest something more than a passing low mood:

- **Low mood most of the day** – Feeling persistently sad, empty, or irritable, rather than having short dips. Clinically, mood that remains low most days for at least two weeks can suggest depression.
- **Loss of interest** – A marked lack of pleasure in activities you normally enjoy. This lack of motivation can affect hobbies, work projects, and social life, reducing overall quality of life.
- **Sleep changes** – Either oversleeping (hypersomnia) or struggling with insomnia. Both patterns disrupt the body's repair systems and worsen fatigue, creating a cycle that's hard to break.
- **Appetite changes** – Some people crave carbohydrates and sugary foods, which temporarily boost serotonin but lead to blood sugar crashes. Others lose interest in eating, raising the risk of weight loss and nutritional gaps.
- **Fatigue and lack of energy** – Constant tiredness that isn't relieved by rest. This symptom reflects both biological changes (hormones, neurotransmitters) and psychological strain.
- **Poor concentration** – Difficulty focusing, slowed thinking, or indecisiveness, which can affect work or study performance. Depression can impair executive function, making tasks feel overwhelming.
- **Physical symptoms** – Aches, headaches, or digestive problems often appear with depression because of the way stress and mood affect the nervous system and immune response.
- **Withdrawing from others** – Avoiding contact with friends or family, which can make mood worse by removing protective social support.

If these signs continue for more than two weeks, it's worth seeking professional help.



Why does seasonal affective disorder happen?

The exact cause of seasonal affective disorder (SAD) isn't fully understood. One theory is that reduced daylight during autumn and winter triggers biological changes in the body. Lower light levels may disrupt the brain's internal clock and affect hormones like serotonin and melatonin, which play a part in mood and sleep. These changes could explain why symptoms are more common in the darker months.

- **Reduced sunlight** – Less light in autumn and winter alters the body's circadian rhythm, the internal "clock" that regulates sleep, mood, and hormones. When disrupted, people can feel constantly jetlagged.
- **Serotonin changes** – Serotonin is a chemical that stabilises mood. Less sunlight reduces its production, which can trigger symptoms of depression such as sadness and anxiety.
- **Melatonin disruption** – Melatonin regulates sleep-wake cycles. In darker months, melatonin levels can remain elevated, making people feel excessively tired and sluggish during the day.
- **Vitamin D deficiency** – Sunlight exposure is the main source of vitamin D. Low levels are linked to both fatigue and low mood, though research is ongoing into exactly how strong the connection is.

Not everyone develops SAD, but those with a history of depression or a family background of the condition are more at risk.

Simple fixes to try first

Mild symptoms can sometimes be managed with simple lifestyle changes. These strategies work best when tried consistently:

- **Maximise daylight** – Aim to get outside for at least 20–30 minutes daily, ideally in the morning. Natural light helps reset the body clock and increases serotonin. Even cloudy days provide more beneficial light than indoor lamps.
- **Stay active** – Physical activity raises endorphins and improves sleep. Exercise also promotes the release of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which supports brain health and resilience against stress.
- **Light therapy** – Lightboxes simulate daylight, helping regulate circadian rhythms and boost mood. Clinical studies show many people with SAD improve within weeks of daily use. It's important to choose a certified device for safety and effectiveness.
- **Healthy eating** – A balanced diet supports energy and mood. Complex carbohydrates, such as oats or brown rice, release energy steadily, while foods high in omega-3 (like salmon or walnuts) may support brain health.
- **Good sleep habits** – A consistent sleep-wake schedule reinforces circadian rhythms. Avoiding late-night screens prevents blue light from suppressing melatonin, making it easier to fall asleep.
- **Stay connected** – Socialising, even briefly, helps reduce feelings of isolation. Social support is known to buffer against stress and improve resilience in people with depression.



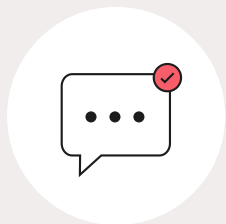
When to seek professional help

It's common to wonder when low mood crosses the line into something that needs medical attention. A good rule of thumb is persistence and impact. If low mood lingers for more than two weeks, or if it significantly interferes with daily life, it's time to get help.

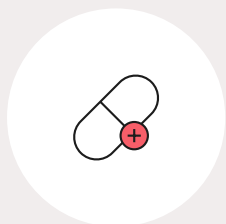
Doctors can check for other conditions (such as thyroid disorders, iron deficiency, or diabetes) that mimic depressive symptoms. They can also discuss treatments such as therapy, medication, or referral to specialists. Seeking help early can prevent symptoms from becoming severe.

Treatment options for SAD and depression

Medical care varies depending on severity, but the following options are commonly used:



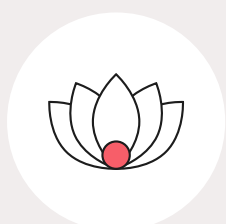
Talking therapies – Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is proven to reduce symptoms of depression by helping people challenge negative thought patterns and develop healthier coping strategies. Other therapies such as interpersonal therapy can be equally as effective.



Medication – Antidepressants, usually SSRIs, are sometimes prescribed. They work by increasing serotonin levels in the brain. For SAD, they may be used seasonally or all year depending on individual needs.



Light therapy – Recommended particularly for SAD, light therapy can be as effective as medication for some people when used daily under clinical guidance.



Lifestyle support – Doctors may advise structured exercise programmes, stress management strategies, or mindfulness alongside clinical treatment, which can help recovery and reduce relapse risk.

Support after diagnosis

Being diagnosed with SAD or depression can feel overwhelming, but support can make a big difference to recovery.

- **Therapists and counsellors** – Provide safe, professional support to explore thoughts and feelings. Therapy gives structured tools for coping with negative thinking and managing stress.
- **Peer support groups** – Meeting others with the same diagnosis can reduce feelings of isolation. Shared experiences offer practical tips and emotional reassurance.
- **Workplace support** – Many employers provide access to mental health programmes or flexible working arrangements. Discussing adjustments can make it easier to manage symptoms day to day.
- **Global organisations** – Trusted organisations such as the World Health Organization, Mental Health Foundation, and National Institute of Mental Health provide free resources, self-care strategies, and educational materials. Accessing this information can help people feel less alone and more informed.



When low mood becomes urgent

While SAD and mild depression are common, **any thoughts of harming yourself should always be treated as urgent**. This is a medical emergency. If you feel unable to stay safe, contact emergency services or a crisis helpline immediately. Help is available, and seeking it quickly can save lives.

How HealthHero can help

With **HealthHero**, you can book an online GP appointment quickly and discreetly. A doctor can assess your symptoms, arrange referrals if needed, and guide you towards the right treatment. **You don't have to manage symptoms alone.**