SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

The Gerson School is always on the lookout for signs of depression with a seasonal pattern, and our team works with parents to document patterns that are important for proper medical diagnosis and treatment.

Sometimes it seems as if humans are developing a hibernation instinct during the shorter days of fall and winter. The darkness and the snow on the ground often make us want to stay home, nap, and hibernate. For some, this urge becomes so overpowering that daily functioning is significantly impaired. We know this as Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD. In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 4th Edition Text Version DSM-IV TR, the actual diagnosis is a clinical depression with a seasonal pattern overlay. It affects more females than males and age is a very strong predictor with younger people at a higher risk for winter depressive episodes. Thus, many high school students find that with the changing seasons comes an episode of depression that interferes with their academic progress. Symptoms tend to begin around the time that academic expectations are intensifying -- such as during finals and Ohio Graduation Tests OGTs.

One of the major symptoms of depression in adolescents, including SAD, is irritability. An increase in irritability and a general downturn in cooperation could signal a change in the student’s emotional well-being. Increased sleeping, overeating, and a general mood of sadness are other signals that the student is struggling with a change due to seasonal related causes. When the changes are seen in conjunction with the shorter days of the winter, seasonal depression might be the problem. At The Gerson School, if we suspect that a student is having a seasonal affective response, we immediately talk with their parent or guardian. A trip to the child’s physician for an evaluation may be in order.

If a student appears to be suffering from a seasonally related mood disorder, parents might consider keeping a log of daily time spent sleeping, overall mood, and critical incidents prior to an appointment with their physician.
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Documenting patterns in a log over several months can be very helpful to the medical professional for accurate diagnosis and treatment.

Seasonal Affective Disorder can be treated with anti-depressant medication. Frequently, non-medication solutions like vitamin D or light therapy work in conjunction with or instead of medication. Part of the function of vitamin D is to lighten mood. The lack of sunlight during the shorter days of winter sometimes causes lower levels of vitamin D. Full spectrum light bulbs can also assist in the management of SAD. An exposure to a period of light therapy per day can alleviate symptoms.

The staff at The Gerson School stays vigilant about any problem that may be impacting our student’s ability to succeed in their academic goals. Our role is to support our students, including recognizing patterns, such as a possible season affective patterns, that may be interfering with their success. When we identify a concern, our first call is to the student’s parent or guardian so that we can work together to help our student find a remedy. Our goal is for our students to graduate and be prepared to move into a happy and productive adulthood.