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Why I Believe SAD Is Real

Let's take a closer look at the study on seasonal affective disorder (SAD). The questions this study raises are two-fold:

- Were the research methods used appropriate to answer the question?
- Were the conclusions the researchers made warranted?

Without getting too technical, there are several problems. First, all the researchers could do is see if each of the events were correlated—the Depression Survey, the weather and latitude, and the season of the year. That's all. Correlation does not mean cause and effect. It's puzzling that experienced researchers would say there's no such thing as SAD based on objective data. They know better.

But were the data objective? We can't really argue the weather on a specific day; it's a matter of record. The same is true for the day of the year the survey was given and the latitude of the telephone numbers area code. What we could argue is whether the Depression Survey was valid given in the format it was given. Every test, whether it's a hard number such as heart rate, cholesterol level, or in this case, a survey, has to be valid and reliable. **Validity** means it's testing what it claims to be testing—in this case major depression; and **reliable** means it will give consistent results every time.

But that's not the biggest problem with the study. The real problem is that SAD is not considered to be a major form of depression. Based on the American Academy of Family Physicians, about 6% of all people diagnosed with depression have SAD and one in five have mild symptoms of depression on a seasonal basis. What does that mean? The scale used, if valid, was not sensitive enough to pick out the mild symptoms of depression. In short, the researchers had a large number of subjects but did not have the appropriate tests to come to the conclusions they did.



There is no reason to remove the diagnosis of SAD from the DSM based on this study; the data and analysis do not support the conclusions. It almost seems the researchers began with the end in mind: SAD was a manufactured condition perpetrated by the drug industry as another way to push pills. What would have been far more interesting is if there were a relationship between pharmaceutical sales and SAD diagnoses since it was added to the DSM about 30 years ago. They didn't examine that.

As I said in the beginning, I believe that SAD is real. It may not be caused by the reasons we think, but it exists. What should you do if you feel you have the symptoms of seasonal depression? Get assessed live and in person by a mental healthcare professional. There are options without medications that can help you deal with SAD quite well, from light therapy to vitamin D supplementation. SAD is no different then any other condition you think you might have: when in doubt, check it out, and that includes your mental health as well!

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. [Clinical Psychological Science](https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702615615867). 2016. doi:10.1177/2167702615615867
2. Depression Survey: <http://patienteducation.stanford.edu/research/phq.pdf>



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