

# Yoga and Seasonal Affective Disorder



*Oak Tree, Snowstorm* by Ansel Adams

Niki Ludington

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The photographs of famed artist Ansel Adams are a breathtakingly beautiful tribute to nature and the seasons. His talent at capturing the mood of the gray winter months has made his work widely respected and popular. His photograph *Oak Tree, Snowstorm* printed on the title page of this thesis is an example of his work. Some people may look at the photo and be awed by the beauty and splendor of the gray shadows and snow. However, others may have a very different reaction. They may look at the photo and be reminded of the nightmare of depression, fatigue, lethargy, and hopelessness they feel each year during the winter months. These people may suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder and the intent of this thesis is to explore how yoga can help them.

### What is Seasonal Affective Disorder?

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a form of major depression that corresponds to seasonal changes during the year. People with SAD generally experience recurring depression beginning in late fall or early winter, which alternates with periods of a high or normal mood during the rest of the year. SAD is linked to the changing levels of light during the year. SAD is described as an “energy crisis” in which many physical and mental functions of the body are affected. Typical characteristics of SAD are: oversleeping or disturbed sleep, daytime fatigue, increased cravings for carbohydrates, weight gain, difficulty concentrating and processing information. SAD characteristics can also include the typical features of depression such as: decreased interest in sex, lethargy, hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, social withdrawal, and decreased interest in normal activities. When these characteristics cause a significant disruption in a person’s life, it is more than a case of the winter blues and a mental healthcare professional will diagnose SAD. Unfortunately, SAD can often be misdiagnosed as hypothyroidism, hypoglycemia, or infectious mononucleosis or other viral infection.

People with SAD experience cognitive problems and report not being able to think clearly and quickly during the winter months. In addition, people with SAD are overcome by anergia, the condition of lethargy or lack of physical activity, during the winter. The result is a feeling of working at a conveyor belt which goes faster and faster, yet you just can’t keep up. During the winter, minor tasks take on major proportions, and things like routine shopping and meal planning can feel impossible because performing tasks in a specific sequence feels overwhelming. Further, people with SAD may feel unable to cope with unexpected obstacles that crop up in daily life.

Changes in mood are a common characteristic of SAD. Someone with SAD may distort reality, experience distorted feelings, and blame himself unfairly for things that

go wrong. Anxiety can also be a component of SAD, and sufferers may appear snappy, irritable, and unpleasant towards others. During the winter months, people with SAD may suffer from backaches, muscle aches, headaches, and may be more susceptible to infection. Many women with SAD report more intense symptoms of premenstrual syndrome.

### Patterns of SAD

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* characterizes SAD as the regular temporal relationship between the onset of symptoms and a particular time of year. This does not include cases where there is an obvious effect of seasonal-related stressors, such as always being unemployed during the winter. SAD typically begins in late October and will subside in March or April. However, the slump can begin as early as August or as late as January. Regardless of the onset, most people with SAD don't feel completely better until May. Full remissions also occur at a characteristic time of year for each individual.

When SAD subsides, people experience increased levels of energy and productivity or even a feeling of euphoria. Tasks that seemed impossible during the winter are easily completed with little stress. However, the acceleration of mood can go too far, and, in some cases, shift to a manic state during the summer months. The condition of hypomania can result from the rapidly increasing light levels on the oversensitive eyes and brain of individuals used to low levels of light in the winter.

Some people experience reverse SAD, an opposite change in mood, and feel depressed in the summer, but better in the fall. This is induced by higher levels of heat, not light. In these cases, depression is characterized by: insomnia, decreased appetite, weight loss, agitation, and anxiety. Others may feel depressed in the summer and winter, yet better in the spring and fall. Further, seasonality can vary over a person's lifetime, and someone's "worst season" can shift to another.

### What Causes SAD?

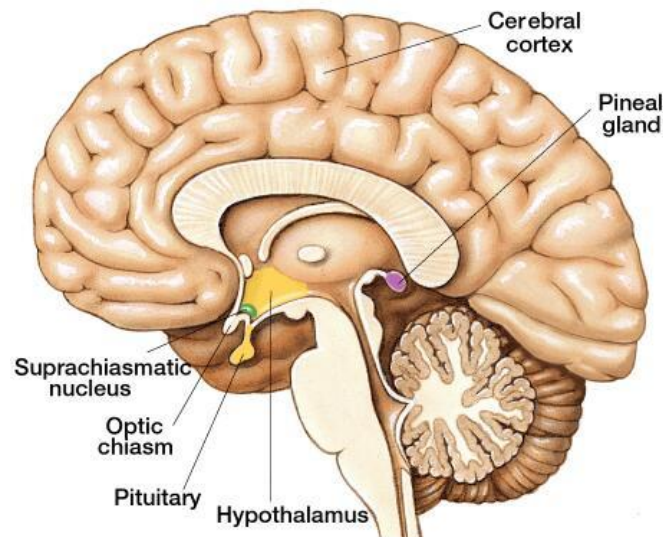
People with SAD often have an inherent vulnerability that predisposes them to the condition. Research shows SAD runs in families, and those with SAD have a close relative with a history of depression, often SAD. SAD is also linked to environmental considerations, primarily light deprivation. Low levels of light during the winter months or low light levels due to fog or cloud cover are linked to SAD. Also, SAD can be caused by low levels of indoor light in the home or office. Stress can also be a trigger for SAD. As previously mentioned, people with SAD may show cognitive impairment and have

difficulty thinking and processing information. Stressful events can overwhelm someone with SAD and worsen their depression.

### Who gets SAD?

Between 60% and 90% of SAD sufferers are women, although men, children, and adolescents can be diagnosed as well. SAD usually begins during a person's twenties and peaks in their forties. SAD is linked to the changes in environmental light, and can be influenced by latitude. It is common for winter depressions to be longer and more profound the farther north a person lives. However, SAD can worsen or reappear with overcast weather at any time during the year or if indoor lighting is decreased. People who have been diagnosed with one or more psychological conditions such as chronic (non-seasonal) depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, premenstrual syndrome, anorexia nervosa, bulimia, or post-traumatic stress disorder may be more likely to suffer from SAD. It is important to remember that SAD is a form of depression and should be diagnosed by a mental health professional qualified to treat patients with SAD.

### SAD and the Pineal Gland



The pineal body is a small, conical-shaped, gland-like structure in the brain near the hypothalamus. It is 6mm to 8mm in length and about 4mm in width. It is part of the endocrine system and produces melatonin, which helps maintain youthfulness, boosts the immune system, contains anti-carcinogen properties, and plays an active role in the regulation of certain diurnal rhythms. Melatonin regulates sleep and is produced during the night while a person sleeps. As the body matures and produces more estrogen and progesterone, the pineal gland starts to decline and melatonin production decreases.

Light also triggers the production of melatonin. Melatonin levels naturally rise in the evening, peak around the onset of sleep, and decrease early in the morning when a person wakes. When light cues are disrupted, the sleep, wake, and sleep cycles get out of synchronization. In winter, low levels of light can cause melatonin production to go awry, disrupting the internal clock and triggering SAD. Poor sleep increases sleepiness during the day which creates a vicious cycle of poorly regulated melatonin production.

### Treatments for SAD

Light therapy, the systematic exposure to bright white fluorescent light, is widely considered to be the first line of treatment for SAD. The lamps, specifically designed to treat SAD, are encased in a box with a diffusing lens, which filters out ultraviolet radiation. The box sits on a tabletop or stand that raises it to eye level or above to illuminate the lower half of the retina, an area rich in photoreceptors thought to mediate the antidepressant response and stimulate the pineal gland. A person must sit in front of the box with the eyes open for 30 to 90 minutes a day for treatment. Studies show users see improvement in symptoms after two weeks. More than 50% of users experience a complete remission of symptoms, although the treatment must continue throughout the difficult season in order to maintain the benefits. A good quality lamp can cost upwards of \$300.00 and may or may not be covered by health insurance. Side effects of light therapy are uncommon but may include: irritability, eyestrain, headaches, nausea, and overactivity. People who experience hypomania in summer may need a lower dose of light therapy. People with bipolar disorder should use caution with light therapy. Dawn simulators, which are bedside lamps that turn on with a timer, can also be used as a treatment for SAD. This is a passive treatment where the lamp gradually provides increasingly brighter light during the predawn hours until the person wakes up. In this approach the eyes are closed, which differs from traditional light therapy. However, studies show an increased sensitivity of the eyes during pre-dawn hours. Individuals should begin a light therapy program under the direction of a mental health professional.

Doctors may prescribe anti-depressant medications to treat people with SAD. Although a viable treatment option, the costs and side effects of anti-depressants are beyond the scope of this paper. Winter vacations to sunny climates can also be part of a treatment plan for SAD. Some people feel that basking in the warm sunshine gives them enough hope to get through the rest of the winter. However, other people report worsening depression upon returning home to the low light levels for the rest of winter. Moderate aerobic exercise can also be helpful in the treatment of SAD. Further, use of light therapy can provide a person with SAD the motivation to stick with a regular

exercise program. Despite the low levels of light, it is important for people with SAD to spend at least 20 minutes a day outside during the winter months walking, meditating, and being in nature. A regular schedule of meals and well-placed snacks comprised of high protein, low carbohydrate foods with plenty of fruits and vegetables provides proper nutrition for SAD sufferers. Those with chronic carbohydrate cravings should reach for foods that contain whole grains.

### Yoga and SAD

A regular and mindful yoga practice can be an essential component of a SAD treatment plan. In some cases, the other treatment options may not help a SAD sufferer at all, yet a yoga practice might provide some relief. In other cases, some combination of treatment options may work best in conjunction with a yoga practice. Individuals with SAD should work with their mental healthcare professional to develop and tweak the best plan for treatment.

The principles of yoga and introspective aspect of the practice are useful to create positive mental attitudes for the treatment of SAD. The practice of yoga creates self-acceptance, which is a critical mindset for students with SAD. It allows them to accept that they are suffering from symptoms of an illness, not flaws in their character. This can alleviate the blame and distorted thinking and feelings associated with SAD. Santosha, or contentment, is also an important yoga principle that applies to students with SAD. Contentment is attained by accepting as inevitable some degree of fluctuation in energy, mood, and ability to function as part of the ordinary ebb and flow of life. Students with SAD may experience greater yearly fluctuations in energy and mood, but through acceptance can find contentment within their seasonal patterns. Svadhyaya, the practice of self study, can also help students with SAD identify and understand their particular seasonal patterns and what treatments help them feel better. The knowledge of a student's seasonal patterns gained through svadhyaya is an important tool to use when discussing treatments for SAD with a mental health professional. Svadhyaya can also empower students with SAD to feel like they can advocate for themselves and take charge of their treatment plan. An understanding of a student's seasonal patterns is also useful for yoga teachers to develop an appropriate yoga practice for a student with SAD. Further, people with SAD require compassion and understanding and the yogic practice of non-judgment creates a safe and nurturing environment for students to draw inward and explore different aspects of a yoga practice.

Yoga also plays an important role in managing stress associated with SAD. Yoga helps keep energy levels up and the mood positive. Yoga sutra 1.2 states that “Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind.” This fundamental principle applies to students with SAD. Yoga can calm the mind and alleviate patterns of distorted thinking and feeling. Students who find the middle path of yoga may be less overwhelmed by routine tasks like shopping and meal planning during the winter months. Yoga can also help ease intense PMS symptoms associated with SAD.

### Yoga, the Pineal Gland, and SAD

A correlation exists between yoga and the psycho-neuro-physiological processes within the body. A regular, daily, and sustained yoga practice influences physiology and can help keep the pineal gland active longer. An active pineal gland will produce melatonin in a regulated fashion, normalize the sleep-eat-wake cycle, and ameliorate SAD. The pineal gland rests in the part of the forebrain associated with controlling the emotions of anger, fear, pleasure, contentment, placidity, and the sex drive. This part of the brain makes the expressions of emotion acceptable and appropriate and integrates the emotional and visceral response to emotional stress. In yoga, the pineal gland is part of the subtle energetic body associated with the seventh chakra, Sahasrara. Referred to as the crown chakra, Sahasrara is the area of the body just above the top of the head. It relates to how we connect to the cosmos: the sun, stars, spirituality, and seasonal rhythms. Yoga practices that focus energy on the crown of the head through inverted postures, pranayama, meditations or sounding certain tones can directly stimulate the pineal gland. These practices, like light therapy, activate the body chemistry to improve the symptoms of SAD.

### Asana and SAD

Yoga postures that stimulate the seventh chakra are an important part of an asana practice for students with SAD. Inversions, such as shoulder stand, headstand, and handstand should be included in sequences. In inverted postures, pressure placed closer to the front of the head, such as in supported adho mukha svanasana, can lift a depressive attitude. Pressure on the crown of the head, such as in sirsasana, stabilize mood and emotions. Inversions increase muscle tone and extension in the postural muscles of the neck, trunk, and limb girdle. They promote erect carriage and counteract the slumped shoulders and droopy head associated with depression. The physiological benefits of inversions can help sooth anxiety associated with SAD. In inversions, gravity massages the carotid sinus to decrease heart rate, respiration and resting blood pressure. Inversions also alter the flow of blood and cerebral spinal fluid which increase

oxygen and glucose in the blood and stimulates neurotransmitters to release non-epinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin to boost the mood.

There are no current large-scale studies on yoga and SAD, but there are studies on yoga for depression and anxiety which can be applied to students with SAD. When sequencing an asana practice for students with SAD, teachers should work with their student to assess the student's mind as agitated or lethargic and the body as energized or tired. Sun salutations which sequence a series of forward and backward bends linked with the breath help to regulate the endocrine system. Back bends are energizing and uplifting and can be used to help students overcome the lethargy associated with SAD during the winter months. Back bends also stimulate the fourth chakra, Anahata, the heart chakra. When the heart chakra is balanced, students with SAD are comfortable in their heart and feel courage to move forward into the future. This can help with the feelings of hopelessness associated with SAD. Spinal twists release tension in the gut and sequencing twisting postures can help students release negative or distorted feelings. During the summer months, forward bends can quiet and soothe the nervous system and help students draw the mind inward. Forward bends can be an integral part of a cooling, restorative sequence to counteract a student's possible tendency towards mania during the peak summer months. Restorative yoga postures combined with breath work can recalibrate a student's nervous system. If a student feels anxious or restless at the beginning of practice, sequence active postures first to burn energy before moving to more restorative postures. Students with SAD should practice with the waves of seasonal fluctuations all year long to strengthen and support their emotional and physiological health, not just when things get really bad.

Yoga teachers can help students with SAD develop a simple and manageable yoga practice. A student suffering from SAD will feel overwhelmed by long, tedious sequences with lots of anatomical cues and complicated prop set-ups. For students suffering from SAD, getting out of bed on a dark, gray winter morning and stepping on a yoga mat is a triumph in itself. A shorter daily practice tailored to the changing seasons will provide the most benefits. During the winter months, gentle, uplifting sequences practiced in the morning will increase energy, boost mood, and motivate the student to stay out of bed and avoid napping. During the summer months, a cooling practice of forward bends and restorative inversions can soothe anxiety and overstimulation caused by heat and higher environmental light levels. Encourage students with SAD to practice a little bit each day all year long to stabilize fluctuating moods and energy levels associated with SAD. A few minutes a day spent on re-establishing the body's innate ability to heal itself is worth it.



## Pranayama and SAD

Pranayama brings fresh vitality and energy into the body. It cools the brain, calms the nerves, improves concentration, and creates a content and alert state of mind. Following are some pranayama techniques that may be useful for students with SAD:

- **Anapana:** The exercise of observing the breath without judgment creates a bridge between the body and mind. Students release preconceived notions and expectations and simply study the breath. Anapana is a form of Svadhaya, self-study, and a tool to help students with SAD study the breath before each yoga practice as well as identify seasonal patterns associated with SAD. Further, Anapana is simple to practice and an easy way to motivate a student with SAD to get on his mat. It can be practiced year-round.
- **Kapalabhati:** This pranayama technique brings light to the front region of the brain and creates a feeling of exhilaration. It creates heat, energizes the mind, and balances and strengthens the nervous system. Students with SAD should practice Kapalabhati during the winter months.
- **Sitali and Sitkari:** These pranayamas focus on the sensation of bringing cool air into the body and are very cooling to the entire system. They are ideal for students with SAD to practice during the summer months. Further, these techniques are soothing to the eyes, and can help counteract overstimulation due to high light levels in the summer.
- **Surya Bhedana:** This pranayama uses Vishnu Mudra to digitally control the breath. Inhalations are done through the right nostril, and exhalations are done through the left. This type of breathing sends electrical impulses through the brain to alleviate depression and lethargy and improve physiological processes, such as stimulating the pineal gland. It also increases digestive power, which can help students who have given into the increased carbohydrate cravings associated with SAD. This pranayama should be practiced during the winter months.
- **Candra Bhedana:** This technique also uses Vishnu Mudra to digitally control the breath. Inhalations are done through the left nostril, and exhalations through the right. It cools the systems and calms the nerves. This pranayama should be practiced during the summer months.
- **Visama Vritti:** Unequal fluctuations of the breath create different energetic effects. Retaining the inhalation is energizing and should be practiced in during the winter months. Lengthening and retaining the exhalation is pacifies the

nervous system and brain, and should be practiced during the summer months. This is an advanced technique. Teachers should guide the student through this pranayama, being mindful that students with SAD can be easily overwhelmed by performing a series of tasks in a specific order. If the student feels agitated while practicing Visama Vrtti or any other pranayama, he should release the technique and return to a normal breathing pattern.

### Meditation and SAD

Meditation is an important component of a yoga practice for students with SAD. During meditation, a student enters into silence to see herself more clearly and to watch what is going on inside without judgment. Thus, meditation is another opportunity for Svadhaya, the self-study that is so important for students with SAD. There are thousands of meditative techniques, each a vehicle to study what is going on in the mind. With that knowledge, the student can identify what she is fixated on and choose to explore it more deeply or release thoughts that no longer serve her. Meditation develops full awareness where the mind is stable and at peace, yet highly alert. It calms the entire being and reduces stress, anger and other negative emotions. It reduces blood pressure and the heart rate and increases vitality and emotional stability. During meditation, the student concentrates on a focal point and becomes totally absorbed in the technique. Meditation should be fun and playful and students shouldn't worry about any one right way to meditate. Following are some meditation techniques that could be useful for students with SAD:

- **Walking Meditation:** A student focuses on her breath with each step as she walks. This is a simple technique that is easy to do and will not feel overwhelming to students with SAD. Walking meditation can be done indoors or outside. Students with severe cases of SAD can do a walking meditation in their home wearing their pajamas. Students with more moderate cases of SAD can bundle up and do a walking meditation outside through their neighborhood or local park. As previously mentioned, spending time outside during the winter is an important component in the treatment of SAD. More adventurous students could do a walking meditation at an outdoor labyrinth. See the Resource section at the end of this document for a list of local labyrinths.
- **Loving, Kindness, and Compassion Meditation:** The student focuses on cultivating loving, kindness, and compassionate thoughts within herself. This can be done with an inner affirmation or mantra. This technique creates a positive and compassionate mindset and can help students with SAD to overcome feelings of shame and embarrassment associated with SAD. It can give students

with SAD the courage to seek support from others or to be brave enough to bring a light box to the office. This technique can be practiced year-round.

- **Trataka:** The student focuses on a candle flame with a steady, uninterrupted gaze. Trataka eradicates fatigue and sloth, improves concentration and memory, cleanses both the eyes and the cerebral cortex, balances the nervous system, and relieves depression, anxiety, and insomnia. Trataka paves the way for deeper meditation techniques. Also, if practiced regularly, it is believed that Trataka could stimulate the pineal gland. Students with SAD should practice this technique during the winter months.
- **Chanting:** For students with SAD, chanting the bija seed sound associated with the seventh chakra, Sahasrara, may be useful. The bija seed sound of the seventh chakra is the long Om.

### Next Steps

A regular, daily yoga practice that incorporates asana, pranayama, and meditation is an important component in the treatment of SAD. Following are sample sequences that can be used for students with SAD during the winter and summer months to help stabilize mood and energy levels throughout the year. The sequences are designed for students with the traditional symptoms of SAD: depression during the winter months and normal or high mood during the summer months. They are simple by design, use very few props, and take around 30 minutes each to practice. The sequences are designed that way to be inviting for students with SAD to practice daily throughout the year. Long sequences with complicated prop set-ups may be agitating and overwhelming to students feeling anxious, depressed, or low on energy.

Through the practice of yoga, students with SAD learn to understand their illness, accept it with compassion, and be empowered to help themselves feel better. Over time, a sustained and mindful yoga practice can take the dread out of winter and help students with SAD find the middle path of contentment all year long, despite seasonal changes. Perhaps, those students will even gain the ability to see the quiet beauty of winter as depicted in the famous photography of Ansel Adams.

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## Resources

Winter Sequence for Low Energy Days

Winter Sequence for High Energy Days

Cooling Sequence for Summer

Where to find Public Labyrinths in Illinois: <http://www.relax4life.com/labfinder.html>

## Winter Sequence for Low Energy Days

Anapana – 5 minutes

Supta Tadasana > Supta Ardha Chandrasana > Eka Pada Apanasana > Apanasana

Jarthara Parivartanasana – bent knees

*Roll to right side and press up to Vajrasana*

*Rub palms together to create warmth, cover eyes, slowly open eyes, spread fingers*

Table Top

Cakravakasana 5x

Plank

*Lower to floor*

Bhujangasana

Adho Mukha Svanasana

>Anjaneyasana – hands in yoga mudra

Uttanasana

Tadasana

Surya Namaskar A 3x

*Turn to face side of mat and step or jump feet wide*

Trikonasana

Prasarita Padottanasana – rest head on blocks

*Step or jump feet together and turn to face front of mat*

Step back to Adho Mukha Svanasana

*Lower knees to floor*

Ardha Matseyandrasana

Gomukhasana with Vajrasana legs

Dolphin

Sirsasana or Ardha Sirsasana - *at wall*

Adho Mukha Virasana – thread the needle

Dandasana

Setu Bandha Sarvangasana – hips supported on block

Viparita Karani

Savasana

## Winter Sequence for High Energy Days

Virasana – center 3 minutes – focus on sensations that arise in nostrils

Kapalabhati

Table Top > press R/L heels back

Stretch wrists:

>Turn fingers back toward you

>Place right hand on left, lift heel of left hand slightly, bend elbow, switch sides

>Place backs of hands on mat, fingers facing one another

Vajrasana – roll wrists to release tension

Adho Mukha Svanasana

Uttanasana

Tadasana > add Baddha Anguliasana > turn wrists so fingers point behind

Surya Namaskar A 3x

Utkatasana

Garudasana

*Turn to face side of mat and step or jump feet wide*

Virabhadrasana 2

>Parsvakonasana

Prasarita Padottanasana

>Parivrtta Padottanasana

*Step or jump feet together*

Adho Mukha Vrksasana or Ardha Adho Mukha Vrksasana *at wall*

Uttanasana

Maricyasana 3 *at wall*

*Return to center of room*

Vinyasa to Adho Mukha Svanasana

*Lower knees to floor*

Parighasana

>place palm on block next to bent leg

> extend opposite arm towards back wall for backward bend

Dandasana

Baddha Konasana – press palms into blocks behind hips to lift chest up

Setu Bandha Sarvangasana

Jathara Parivartanasana – bent knees

Savasana



## Cooling Sequence for Summer

Easy Resting Pose – Belly Breathing with Visama Vrtti – lengthen exhalations

*Roll to right side and press up to knees*

Adho Mukha Virasana – hands on blocks

Table top

Cat / Cow

Adho Mukha Virasana

>Anjaneyasana – hands on blocks

Uttanasana

Tadasana

Ardha Chandrasana 1

Parsvottanasana – hands on blocks

Tadasana

Vrksasana – *at wall*

Clock Stretch – *at wall*

Shower pose – *at wall*

*Return to center of room*

*Turn to face side of mat and step or jump feet wide*

Trikonasana

Prasarita Padottanasana – hands in yoga mudra

*Step or jump feet together*

Step back to Adho Mukha Svanasana

*Lower knees to floor*

Dandasana

Janu Sirsasana

Setu Bandha Sarvangasana

Salamba Sarvangasana

Halasana

Supta Sukhasana – legs rest on folded blankets

Sitali

Savasana