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Natural Help for Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

The days are getting shorter, the nights are long and dark, and it's cold and grey outside. It's the time of year to snuggle up by the woodstove with a good book, eat nourishing soups and stews, stay at home more, and go to bed early.

For those with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), it can also be the dreaded time of year when symptoms reappear: depression, irritability, anxiety, fatigue, lethargy, and sleep issues. As well, there may be an increased craving for sugar and carbs, and a tendency to overeat. This, in combination with a lack of physical activity, may lead to weight gain, which perpetuates the cycle.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and Acupuncture can be very helpful in dealing with this distressing condition. It brings balance to the body and mind, restoring the free flow of Qi (bioenergy) in the body. In this way, it can lift the mood, increase energy and motivation, improve immunity, restore sleeping and waking cycles, and balance appetite and digestion. For many of my clients, it's just the boost they need this time of year, helping them to be strong, balanced and resilient for the coming months of winter.

In TCM, we view each person as an individual. For this reason, each client is given a thorough diagnosis, involving questions regarding their physical and emotional functions, as well as a pulse and tongue diagnosis. Each client is treated differently depending on their specific condition. The basic goal in TCM is to balance the yin and yang energies within the body. The yin is described as being cooler, darker, more inward and passive. The yang is a brighter, warmer, more outward and active energy. Autumn is the beginning of the yin cycle in nature, with decreasing daylight, cooler temperatures, and the dying back of growth. This is the signal for us to begin drawing inward too, to become more introspective and do less. As we move into winter, the most yin season, it is even more important to conserve our energy. Physical or mental stress and overexertion has extra impact on us at this time, and can deplete our reserves, leading to exhaustion and depression.

Traditional Chinese Medicine sees each person as a part of the whole. This includes the cycles of nature – the day and night, the weather systems, and the four seasons. In order to achieve and maintain a harmonious way of being in the world, this ancient system stresses the importance of being in rhythm with nature. Only then can we live in a state of health and well-being, in body, mind and spirit.

For everyone, and especially those with SAD, it's important to rest and replenish in fall and winter. At the same time, balance is important! Get outside and exercise regularly, as moving the body and being in the sunlight can go a long way toward lifting the mood and increasing energy. A "SAD lamp", a special type of light that mimics daylight may also be helpful. Decreasing carbs, sugar and alcohol can help us feel lighter, clearer and less tired. And perhaps most importantly: spend time with family and friends, and engage in activities that you enjoy. Anything that increases joy in our lives can bring back the "fire", keeping this dark, cold time of year from bringing us down!

*Jane Marshall, D.TCM, D.Ac is a member of the NS Association of Acupuncturists (NSAA) and has been practicing Traditional Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture for 17 years. Her office is located at 112 Front St, in downtown Wolfville. For more information, check out her website: [janemarshallacupuncture.ca](http://janemarshallacupuncture.ca). For appointments, call: (902)404-3374*

