

What is Seasonal Affective Disorder?

Seasonal affective disorder not necessarily a completely different type of mood disorder. Rather, is a *subtype* or characteristic of several different kinds of mood disorders—major depressive disorder, bipolar I disorder, or bipolar II disorder. So, the person is said to have one of those disorders and the words “with seasonal pattern” are added to the diagnosis. For example, the person could be said to suffer from “Major depressive disorder, recurrent, with seasonal pattern” or with “Bipolar I disorder, with seasonal pattern.”

Three characteristics of a seasonal pattern

Not every person who has a depressive episode in the winter has a seasonal pattern. In order for a mood disorder to be said to have a seasonal pattern, three characteristics need to be present.

1. The episodes of the illness regularly start at a particular time of the year, e.g., in the fall or winter.

A detail: However, if the onset of depression at a particular time of the year was clearly related to an external stress that occurred at that particular time of year, we would not consider that to be a seasonal pattern.

Another detail: Note that even though in most persons with a seasonal pattern the depression starts in the fall or winter, this is not essential for it to be called a seasonal pattern. For example, the depressive episodes may start in the summer in some persons, but this is rare.

2. The end of the episodes of the illness also regularly occurs at a particular time of the year.

Note: the episode of the illness is said to end when the depression, mania, or hypomania ends. That particular episode is also said to have ended if the illness switches from depression to mania or hypomania. Or if the illness switches from mania or hypomania to depression.

3. The seasonal nature of the episodes of the illness is *characteristic* of the illness in that person. What do we mean by that?

a) *In the previous two years:* there should have been at least *two* seasonal major depressive episodes AND no non-seasonal episodes should have occurred.

b) *Over the person's lifetime:* seasonal major depressive episodes should have substantially outnumbered the non-seasonal major depressive episodes.