

Renew

Wellness for Veterinary Professionals

This profession can be tremendously rewarding but it can also be incredibly taxing, both mentally and physically. This series—*Renew*—explores wellness for veterinary professionals from a variety of angles...physical, mental, and emotional. We hope these articles provide both insight and inspiration for a lifetime of wellness and renewal.

Shining Light on Seasonal Affective Disorder

By Tosha Zimmerman, CVT

This past year has been one of the most difficult many of us have had to face. On top of an ongoing pandemic, which in itself is enough, we have had to face natural disasters such as record-breaking wildfires and hurricanes as well as a continuing political crisis that has caused immeasurable division. Many of us have experienced the death of a loved one or beloved pet, extended separation from loved ones and friends, and an abundance of endless change that has kept us from feeling the slightest hint of normalcy again.

Our emotional wellbeing is already being tested on a daily basis and if you are like me, seasonal depression is an additional concern. I have endured years of anxiety and depression so the thought of sinking deeper into the quicksand has encouraged me to try to plan ahead and establish ways to get ahead of winter seasonal depression.

According to the Mayo Clinic's website, seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is "a type of depression that's related to changes in seasons—SAD begins and ends at about the same times every year." Some of the most common symptoms are sadness, fatigue, lack of motivation, loss of

interest in enjoyable things, insomnia, and withdrawal. My seasonal depression begins in the fall when I notice the sun starting to set earlier and it is in full force by the time we set our clocks back. This year it has been more difficult to manage my mental health due to many reasons besides the pandemic, but I am determined not to let the arrival of winter trigger a downward spiral of seasonal depression that usually cripples me annually.

There are many reputable sources such as the Mayo Clinic that provide recommendations to combat seasonal depression. Experimenting with some of the following tools should point anyone in the right direction to successfully combat the symptoms of SAD.

The tool that most people have heard of is light box therapy. Light boxes, which mimic outdoor light by emitting a broad-spectrum ultraviolet light, reduce the release of melatonin and are associated with increasing serotonin levels. The suggestion is to utilize a light box first thing in the morning for at least 30 minutes which should help you start the day with a more positive, happy attitude. Although you can purchase a light box without a prescription, you should

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consult your physician for recommendations and the appropriate usage. I personally have not tried using a light box but I walk every morning after the sun has come up as well as work close to a window that provides natural light. These practices have helped me greatly with maintaining an optimistic mood throughout the day.

In addition to light therapy, exercise has also been proven to increase serotonin levels as well as improve mood. If you can combine sunshine and exercises such as walking and/or biking, even better! Exercise such as strength training and yoga relieve stress and anxiety which can reduce symptoms of depression and promote the sensation of feeling good about yourself by improving your state of mind.

Another tool that I have found helpful, especially since social distancing continues to be the recommendation for the foreseeable future, is to identify interests that will satisfy and stimulate the brain. Getting together with friends/family through Zoom to play trivia or participate in an online escape room are great ways to invigorate your brain while remaining social. Exploring your creative side by drawing, painting, or playing music are great ways to occupy your mind while learning something new.

The last tool is to be open to professional medical help especially if you are experiencing intense symptoms. SAD is a documented and legitimate medical disorder, and if left untreated can progress into chronic depression. Therefore, there is no shame in seeking professional medical intervention for it just as one would for any other illness or injury.

I have often found that if I plan one event every one to two weeks that I get to look forward to, such as cooking one of my favorite meals, chatting with a good friend on the phone, or some other event that I enjoy, having it on the horizon keeps my motivation level up. Permit yourself to indulge a bit. It can boost your enthusiasm and improve your outlook.

Although I can count on seasonal affective disorder to make an appearance each year in my life, having an arsenal



of tools to cope gives me great hope. By employing a combination of these strategies, I look forward to each day rather than dreading them. I find myself more engaged with a sense of calmness and am more in tune with myself and what makes me happy. Inspiring others to recognize what may get them through this particular winter and establishing a plan gives me hope that we can all come out of the other side happier and healthier in the long run.

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Tosha Zimmerman, CVT

Tosha Zimmerman has been a CVT since 2002 working in emergency, internal medicine, and neurology. Tosha graduated from St. Petersburg College in 2002, with a AAS degree in in veterinary technology. She has a passion for mentoring the veterinary community by encouraging the importance of positivity and self-care. Ms. Zimmerman is a hiring specialist at VetCor.