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AVAILABLE FOR INTERVIEWS:

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HOLIDAYS AND DEPRESSION – MENTAL HEALTH EXPERTS AT CEDARS-SINAI SHARE TIPS TO DEAL WITH SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER

(LOS ANGELES – December 16, 2003) With the holidays at hand and families gathering together to celebrate, the winter season can be a busy and joyful time of year. But for many people, holiday events coupled with sensitivity to changes in light and temperature, can cause anxiety and/or depression.

“These changes combined with the stresses of holiday travel, sensitive family dynamics, and managing families and friends expectations can build a recipe for depression during the winter months. Juggling these variables can be challenging and can make it difficult to enjoy the season,” said Mark Rapaport, M.D., Chairman of Psychiatry at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a mood disorder associated with episodes of depression during seasonal variations in light that cause a shift in our “biological internal clocks” or circadian rhythms. According to the National Mental Health Association, the most difficult months for SAD sufferers are January and February, with young adults and women at higher risk.

Although no one knows for sure why some people are affected by SAD, a possible cause may be due to the release of melatonin, a sleep-related hormone secreted by the pineal gland in the brain, which is produced at increased levels in the dark. Thus, when daylight savings time ends and it begins getting dark earlier in the day, production of the hormone increases and may lead to depressive episodes.

“These biological variables mixed with environmental conditions such as cold weather, emotional reactions to the holidays and the stresses that go with the season can all lead to depression,” said Dr. Rapaport.

To combat the effects of SAD, some people are treated with phototherapy or bright light therapy, which has been shown to help suppress the brain’s secretion of melatonin. The treatment consists of having a patient sit or lie under a bank of white fluorescent lights placed on a metal reflector shielded with a plastic screen. For mild symptoms, spending time outdoors during the day or arranging homes and work places to receive more sunlight can be helpful.

The following are six tips to proactively reduce or eliminate environmental stressors and symptoms of SAD:

- 1. Don't idealize the past.** The holidays bring out the "traditionalist" in most people, and many of us get caught up in trying to make the holidays just like years past. The reality is, every year brings about new circumstances, surprises and colorful characters who are bound to "rock the boat" during your "perfect" holiday celebration. "Reduce your anxiety about holiday traditions by maximizing your current circumstances to create new traditions, build on old ones, and abandon unrealistic expectations," says Dr. Rapaport.
- 2. Pace yourself.** Unlike any other time of year, the holiday season is a time of celebrations, family gatherings, winter activities and entertaining visitors. These variables added to an already busy lifestyle can cause unnecessary anxiety and hopelessness when projects begin "falling through the cracks." The key to managing additional responsibilities and social commitments during this time is to pace yourself and organize your time. Make a list and prioritize your most important activities. Accept help, and allow for quiet time at regular intervals.
- 3. Acknowledge your feelings.** The holiday season does not automatically banish reasons for feeling sad or lonely. If you have experienced the loss of a loved one, are far from family and/or friends, or are generally affected by changes in weather and light, it is ok to acknowledge that these feelings are present – even if you choose not to express them.
- 4. Don't drink too much!** Excessive drinking only perpetuates anxiety and depression, significantly increasing the risk for accidents in the car or at home. If you are prone to depression around this time of year, keep your alcohol intake to a minimum. On the other hand, if you have a history of having a problem with alcohol, do not drink at all! No host should be offended if you drink non-alcoholic beverages and you are not required to explain your decision not to drink," Jeffrey Wilkins, Vice Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry and Director of Addiction Medicine at Cedars-Sinai.
- 5. Create a support system.** Spend time with people who are supportive and care about you. If that isn't your family, then spend this time with friends. If you are far from home or alone during special times, make a proactive effort to build new friendships or contact someone you have lost touch with.
- 6. Seek treatment.** Sometimes, SAD can get the best of us, even when proactively reducing stressors. If you are experiencing symptoms of depression during the winter months that are uncommon for you any other time of year, contact a mental health professional who can provide counseling and treatment to help you "weather the storm."

For more information Seasonal Affective Disorder or Mental Health Programs at Cedars-Sinai, please call 1-800-CEDARS-1 or 1-800-233-2771.

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