

Olympia TBI Support Group – January 6, 2026

Depression, Seasonal Affective Disorder, Sadness – How to tell the difference? Laura Dahmer-White, Ph.D.

- Changes and Problems in mood are very common following TBI
- Emotions such as anger, fear, sadness and worry are common following TBI
- Often these feelings improve over time but sometimes people experience ongoing feelings of sadness and depression that make it hard for them to enjoy things or complete essential activities
- In the Pacific Northwest, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is very Common because of our climate - What is it?

Symptoms of SAD

1. Increased sleep
2. Increased appetite, often craving carbohydrates
3. Weight gain
4. Fatigue or loss of energy
5. Feeling sad and blue but not just the “winter blues”
6. Feeling heavy and lethargic
 - The symptoms must occur at a particular time of the year (fall, winter) and go away when the seasons change
 - The symptoms must be significant enough to impact a person’s ability to function in daily tasks or relationships

Depression – a clinical condition and change in mood that causes significant disruption in a person’s ability to function in daily life. It involves both 1) **Depressed Mood** and 2) **Loss of interest in or pleasure from activities**. In addition, 5 or more of the following criteria need to be met:

1. Depressed mood most of the day and nearly every day
2. Markedly reduce interest or pleasure in all or almost all activities
3. Weight loss or weight gain
4. Sleep changes (insomnia or hypersomnia)
5. Psychomotor retardation or agitation (being slowed down or being agitated and restless)
6. Fatigue and loss of energy nearly every day
7. Feelings of worthlessness and/or excessive guilt
8. Problems with concentration and decision-making
9. Recurrent thoughts about death and dying

Facts about TBI and Depression:

- About 50% of people with TBI will have symptoms of major depression within the first year of their brain injury
- TBI survivors are 8 times more likely to have depression than the general population
- About 28% of people with TBI have clinical depression
- The risk of depression tends to increase during the first 5 years and then gradually decrease thereafter
- Women are almost 50% more likely to develop or be diagnosed with depression following a TBI

Factors that Contribute to Depression and Mood Issues after TBI

- Changes/damage to parts of the brain that regulate mood
- Changes in neurotransmitters caused by the acceleration/deceleration forces of the head
- Changes in hormones that impact mood
- Loss of independence
- Loss of friendships and social interactions
- Inability to work – lack of social interactions, financial stress, no longer able to engage in productive activities
- Cognitive and physical disabilities that change how people perceive themselves

What can I do if I am experiencing depression or symptoms of SAD?

1. Depression is a serious and life-threatening medical condition so if you are experiencing any thoughts about suicide or self-harm and are not able to do your basic activities of living –
 - Call your doctor or therapist
 - Call the Crisis Line at **360-754-1338**
2. Social isolation makes depression worse
 - Talk to friends and family
 - Come to this support group
 - Talk to a therapist
3. Engage in activities that you enjoy (creating art, listening to music you like, physical recreation)
4. Exercise
5. Use wellness techniques such as mindfulness, meditation, yoga, Chi Gong, Tai Chi
6. Create a “Soothe Box”
7. Pay attention to what you put in your body
 - Eat healthy – be careful about carbs and sugar
 - Alcohol just makes depression worse
 - Marijuana can also make depression worse