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Commentary

Seasonal Changes and Their Effects on Mental Health Among Academic Professionals

Tanaka Hiroshi*

Department of Psychiatry, University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan

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Seasonal changes have long been recognized as influential factors in shaping mental health and emotional well-being, with colder and darker months often linked to decreased mood, energy and motivation. While much of the existing research has centered on Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) in the general population, less attention has been given to how these seasonal variations affect professionals working in structured and demanding environments such as academia. Faculty members face unique pressures throughout the academic year, including teaching responsibilities, research demands and administrative duties, which may be further intensified by environmental conditions. Understanding how these seasonal fluctuations influence emotional and professional well-being can offer valuable insights into workplace mental health. Throughout the year, many academics experience noticeable changes in mood and motivation that correspond with shifts in daylight and temperature. As winter approaches and daylight hours' decrease, energy levels, enthusiasm and overall mood tend to decline. This drop is especially evident among those who spend most of their time indoors or work in windowless spaces, limiting their exposure to natural light. Although these mood changes may not reach the severity of clinical depression or SAD, they can still have meaningful effects on daily performance, focus and job satisfaction. Many professionals describe feeling more fatigued, less inspired and slower to engage with both work-related and personal tasks during darker months. These experiences highlight the subtle yet powerful influence of seasonal transitions on emotional balance and productivity.

Despite these challenges, several protective factors can help mitigate the effects of seasonal mood variations. Maintaining consistent daily routines, engaging in regular physical exercise and seeking daylight exposure all play a crucial role in stabilizing mood and sustaining motivation. Individuals who incorporate outdoor activities or make a deliberate effort to spend time in natural light often report feeling more energetic and emotionally balanced throughout the year. Natural light regulates circadian rhythms and influences serotonin production, both of which are essential for maintaining emotional stability and cognitive function. Simple lifestyle adjustments such as walking outdoors during daylight hours, arranging workspaces near windows or using light therapy devices can make a meaningful difference in how professionals cope with seasonal changes. Environmental design and workplace culture also contribute significantly to how seasonal variations are experienced. Workplaces that prioritize access to natural light, provide flexible scheduling and promote physical and mental well-being tend to foster greater resilience among staff. Incorporating wellness initiatives such as mindfulness programs, short movement breaks or faculty fitness activities can further enhance mood stability. Encouraging awareness of seasonal patterns allows individuals to anticipate emotional dips and proactively adopt strategies to maintain balance. Institutions can also support staff by offering workshops or information sessions on managing seasonal changes, emphasizing that these shifts are natural and not a reflection of personal weakness.

Leadership within academic settings plays an essential role in creating an environment that recognizes and accommodates seasonal influences on mental health. Administrators who acknowledge the environmental factors affecting staff performance and morale can help reduce stigma around emotional well-being. Flexible work policies, improved office lighting and opportunities for outdoor engagement during work hours can all contribute to greater job satisfaction and emotional resilience. Recognizing that fluctuations in mood and motivation are often linked to external conditions rather than personal shortcomings promotes a more compassionate and supportive institutional culture. Ultimately, seasonal changes can subtly but significantly shape mood, energy and motivation, even among individuals not prone to clinical disorders. In academic environments, where productivity and emotional balance are closely tied, these fluctuations can influence both personal fulfillment and institutional performance. Consistent routines, physical activity and exposure to natural light serve as effective protective measures against these seasonal challenges. By

Correspondence to: Tanaka Hiroshi, Department of Psychiatry, University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan, E-mail: hiroshi.tanak@utokyo.jp

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promoting awareness, improving environmental design and encouraging balanced lifestyles, academic institutions can foster healthier, more adaptive and more productive communities year-round.

Addressing the psychological effects of seasonal variation also requires a broader cultural shift in how workplaces perceive mental health across the year. Rather than expecting uniform productivity regardless of environmental changes, institutions can adopt a more flexible and humane approach that aligns with natural rhythms. For example, offering hybrid or remote work options during the darker months, scheduling lighter workloads or administrative tasks during winter and emphasizing collaboration during more energetic seasons like spring and summer could help balance overall output while supporting emotional well-being. Integrating nature-based design principles such as indoor plants, open spaces and warm lighting can also create a more uplifting and restorative atmosphere. When faculty and professionals feel supported through seasonal transitions, they are not only more resilient but also more creative, engaged and effective in their work. In this way, understanding and responding to the seasonal dimension of mental health becomes an investment not just in individual wellness but in the long-term vitality and success.