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Light therapy

Assuming that the Mayan calendar mania was wrong and the world spins madly on, today marks the shortest daytime of the year in the northern hemisphere. In Boston, we get just nine hours of daylight; Barrow, Alaska doesn't get any. Although the winter solstice marks a seasonal turning point, with daylight getting incrementally longer from here until June 21, for people with seasonal affective disorder it's just another day of feeling lousy.

People with this condition lose steam when the days get shorter and the nights longer. Symptoms of seasonal affective disorder include loss of pleasure and energy, feelings of worthlessness, inability to concentrate, and uncontrollable urges to eat sugar and high-carbohydrate foods. Although they fade with the arrival of spring, seasonal affective disorder can leave you overweight, out of shape, and with strained relationships and employment woes.

We don't know exactly why seasonal affective disorder occurs. According to a review published in the current issue

of American Family Physician, there are probably several different causes, including changes in the body's natural daily rhythms (circadian rhythms), in the eyes' sensitivity to light, and in how chemical messengers like serotonin function.

Some people find that taking an antidepressant medication helps. A unique approach is the use of light therapy.

The value of light

If lack of sunlight causes or contributes to seasonal affective disorder, then getting more light may reverse it. Bright light works by stimulating cells in the retina that connect to the hypothalamus, a part of the brain that helps control circadian rhythms. Activating the hypothalamus at a certain time every day can restore a normal circadian rhythm and thus banish seasonal symptoms.

Light therapy entails sitting close to a special "light box" for 30 minutes a day, usually as soon after waking up as possible. These boxes provide 10,000 lux ("lux" is a measure of light intensity). That's about 100 times brighter than usual indoor lighting; a bright sunny day is 50,000 lux or more. You need to have your eyes open, but don't look at the light. Many people use the time to read a newspaper, book, or magazine, or catch up on work.

Although light therapy is at least as effective as antidepressant medications for treating seasonal affective disorder, it doesn't work or isn't appropriate for everyone. Some people need more light, or brighter light, can trigger hypomania or mania.

(Continued on page 2)





Planning your approach

(Light cont.)

And even though the risk of eye damage from bright light is low, anyone with diabetes (which can damage the retina) or pre-existing eye disease should check with a doctor before trying light therapy.

In efforts to make light therapy more effective, researchers are looking to improve it in various ways. One approach is creating light boxes that simulate dawn and sunrise, gradually increasing in intensity from darkness to 300 lux. Another involves using lower intensity blue light, which has a more powerful effect on the retina than white light.

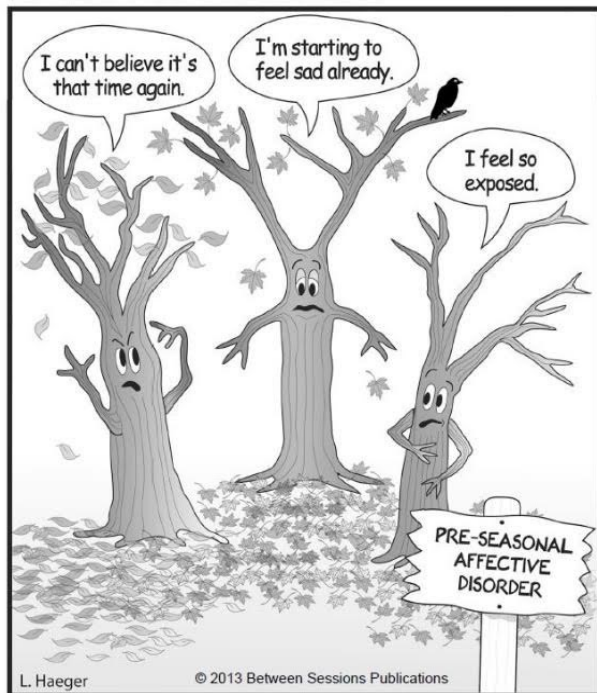
When I see a patient with seasonal affective disorder, I suggest he or she try light therapy after awakening. If it does not help or it creates bothersome side effects, it may be worth trying antidepressants or one of the light therapy alternatives under investigation.

Although light treatment is relatively safe, here are a few cautions if you want to try it.

- Before investing your money—and time—on bright light therapy, work with a professional who is qualified to make a diagnosis. It's important to evaluate your individual situation, and to determine whether you really have seasonal affective disorder.
- Buyer beware—the FDA does not test, approve, or regulate light box devices.
- Before buying a light box, ask about the wavelengths of light it delivers (to avoid any that might be harmful, experts recommend fluorescent light without ultraviolet wavelengths).
- Another way to determine whether a product fits the intended purpose is to see if it is used in any hospitals, clinics, or reputable research facilities.

Finally, keep in mind that depression, as well as the symptoms of seasonal affective disorder, can have many causes and that there are many good ways to treat them. Review all your treatment options. Above all, establish a relationship with a professional who can help you periodically review your progress.

BETWEEN SESSIONS™



Seasonal Affective Disorder (S.A.D.) is real. It helps to prepare.



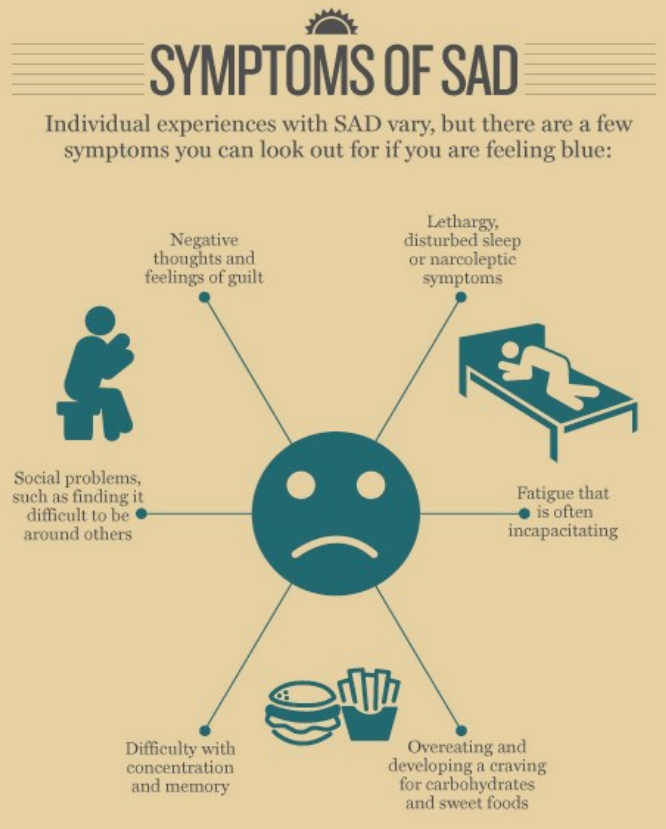
App of the month: Sleep Cycle Alarm Clock (\$0.99) You set an alarm that will wake you up within a half of hour of that time. For example, if I need to wake up by 8:00 AM, it will wake me up between 7:30 AM and 8:00 AM. You put your phone under your sheet at night, and it tracks your sleep patterns to wake you up most easily. Lately I have not been using this app as regularly as I would like, but for a while I was using it each night. I love that I can see whether or not I am getting enough deep sleep, and waking up is much easier! See more at: <http://bit.ly/1RidOPT>



Managing S.A.D.

Symptoms of SAD are the same as those of depression. They can vary in severity and often interfere with personal relationships. Symptoms include fatigue, pervasively sad mood, loss of interest, sleep difficulty or excessive sleeping, craving and eating more starches and sweets, weight gain, feelings of hopelessness or despair and thoughts of suicide.

If your winter blues are severe and have gone on for at least two winters, you might have a case of SAD.



How a psychologist can help

A psychologist can help you identify problem areas and then develop an action plan for changing them. Psychologists are uniquely trained to understand the connection between the mind and body. They can offer strategies as to how to adjust your goals so that they are attainable, as well as help you change unhealthy behaviors and address emotional issues.. You can find psychologists near you by visiting APA's Psychologist Locator online.

From: www.apa.org

Questions, comments, or feed-
back on the MHA Newsletter?
We appreciate your thoughts!

Addressee

EMAIL OPTION:

If you'd like to receive
the MHA Newsletter electronically
in color as a PDF, please send
your full name and email to:
erin@sevenvalleyshealth.org

Community Events & Support

LGBT & Ally Youth Support Group

Monthly group for youth held at Cortland Prevention Center, 73
Main Street. Contact 607-756-8970 for more information.

Parents & Change Support Group



This support group is for parents and caregivers of
children, teens, and adults with mental health
conditions. Meetings are from 6:00pm to 7:30pm at 90
Central Avenue in Cortland.

2015 Meetings: December 21

For more information, contact Beckey Tripp at
parentsandchange@yahoo.com.

**"Mental Health is nothing to be ashamed of.
Neither is talking about it"**

Skating on the Homer Green

Beat the winter blues and get active!
Free outdoor skating on the Village
Green, Main Street Homer.

December—March, weather permitting.



Survivors Of a Loved One's Suicide (SOLOS) Support Group



Come join us in a safe, comfortable environment to talk
about your lost loved one(s). Meetings are held the first
Thursday of every month from 5:30 pm - 7:00 pm.
For more info please contact Family Counseling Services
at 607-753-0234.



If you have an upcoming community event you would like considered for admission to
the MHA Newsletter, send your announcement to **erin@sevenvalleyshealth.org**

Disclaimer: The information presented here does not constitute professional medical advice. Individuals respond to treatment for
mental health conditions in different ways, and treatment plans often need adjustment over time. Patients should work closely with
their doctor and other health professionals in order to achieve optimal control of symptoms.