



Lighten up the day

Low daylight in winter can cause untold misery for those suffering from SAD

With the excesses of the holiday period still fresh in our memories, not to mention all those New Year resolutions that, however well intentioned, have already started to be broken, the winter months can be a time when it's extremely difficult to motivate ourselves properly.

Leaving home for work during the hours of darkness, returning home in similar conditions, and possibly going for days on end without being exposed to anything even approaching sunshine can be a depressing experience, and one that is becoming recognised increasingly as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

Like many conditions about which our understanding was initially very limited, SAD can be problematic for sufferers. The effects of symptoms, such as extreme lethargy and exhaustion, can be exacerbated by accusations of laziness or suggestions that sufferers should 'pull themselves together'.

If you suffer (or think you might) from SAD, you're not alone, and there are many steps you can take to reduce the effects of the condition. Yet, if you've never had to deal with the effects of SAD, the experiences of two sufferers may provide an insight into how debilitating it can be.

DANK AND DISMAL

"I have suffered physically, financially and socially as a result of this illness," says one. "It isn't helpful to be reminded that you could be considered as simply bone-idle. During the 28 years of my working life before this, I had never had a sick note from any doctor."

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SAD sufferer

Another explains: "SAD has been linked to the increase of the hormone melatonin in the brain during the shorter and darker days from October until March. This hormone also causes depression and, as someone who for years dreaded the onset of winter and the constant anxiety and seeming inability to cope with life that this brought, I object

strongly to being criticised by [people who have] no idea what misery and despair can be suffered."

These are the words of just two of up to 500,000 Britons who suffer from SAD every year. Caused by a biochemical imbalance in the brain due to the shortening of daylight hours and lack of sunlight during the winter, SAD is generally agreed to be at its worst during December, January and February, and for many people produces a range of symptoms including sleep problems, depression, tiredness, loss of sex drive and increased appetite.

In extreme cases, the addition of light deprivation to existing problems can even cause individuals to commit suicide.

One of the reasons for the increasing acceptance that light starvation is to blame for these symptoms is that, in comparison, the symptoms are extremely rare among people living within 30 degrees of the Equator – where there is plenty of daylight and the light itself is stronger.

Another is the considerable volume of anecdotal evidence. How many people do you know, for example, who look forward to shorter days and longer nights, preferring getting up and returning home in the dark? Or who say they feel better in the winter than they do in the summer? It's hardly surprising, therefore, that we are now experiencing what for many people is the most depressing time of the year.

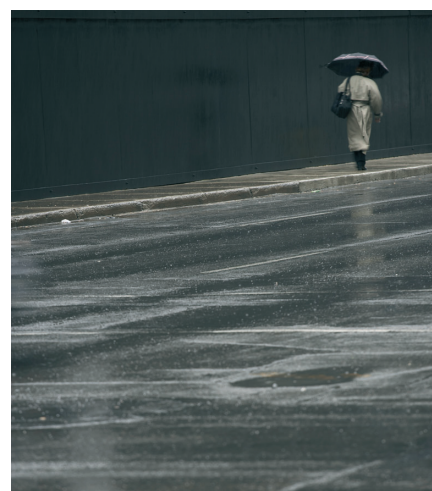
While SAD can affect all age groups, statistics suggest that it has an impact more often on people aged between 18 and 30. If it affects you, one source of treatment that you may find beneficial is 'light therapy', which, according to the SADA (SAD Association), has been proven effective in up to 85 per cent of diagnosed cases.

POSITIVE EFFECT

Light therapy involves exposure to a very bright light for up to four hours per day. Although there has been no major scientific trial of the lightboxes involved in the therapy so far, they do appear to have an effect, with some people claiming to have had their lives transformed by the treatment.

According to SADA, while the lighting in the average home or office gives off 200–500 lux (the international measurement of luminosity), someone with SAD needs to be exposed to a light source that emits at least 2,500 lux.

Although this sounds very bright, it is still considerably less than what we're exposed



Do you need to ward off those winter blues?

to on a bright summer's day, when the sun can provide light measured at 100,000 lux.

To be effective, light therapy should be used everyday during the winter months and, for people who are particularly susceptible, during dull days even in summer.

Users must sit close to the lightbox – no more than three feet away – and allow the light to shine directly into their eyes. If four hours a day sounds like too much time to be practicable, lightboxes that emit more light are also available. These are more expensive but can reduce the treatment time to no more than half an hour per day.

Provided that it is undertaken everyday, the practice of light therapy can usually be expected to have an effect within as few as four days, according to its proponents.

NATURAL LIGHT

If you feel that the effects of SAD are insufficient to justify investment in a lightbox, it may still pay to note the increasing acceptance that most people would benefit from getting as much natural light as possible during the winter months, particularly during the middle part of the day.

Taking a break away from your desk at lunchtime and getting out into the open air will provide useful exercise and a natural break from the pressures of the working day, but could also help to satisfy your body's need for exposure to daylight.

Whatever your opinion of SAD, it's important to remember that for sufferers, the symptoms are very real.

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