

Chasing away the blues

Sometimes the winter blahs are much more than just wishing for summer

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If you're feeling a little winter weary right about now, you're not alone. For most people, the best remedy for the mid-winter blues is a little self-indulgence.

In ancient times, when fuel and food supplies began to run low, our ancestors would gather around the hearth to share the warmth of the fire and conserve their energy. The warm fires inside were symbolic of the returning of the sun's warming rays to the Earth outside.

Instead of rebelling when nature urges us to slow down, we should indulge ourselves. Turn off the computer, television and other electronic stimuli and reignite your passionate self:

Shower in the dark

One word of advice — make sure you know the difference between the shampoo and conditioner.

Have a candlelit bath

Pour yourself a glass of wine, light the candles and soak your cares away. If you're lucky enough to have a Jacuzzi — or at least a large bathtub — you can save energy by sharing the tub with your partner.

Spend a day at the "beach" with your family

Pack up your bathing suits and enjoy an indoor swimming pool at your local recreational centre.

Rediscover the joy of conversation

Unplug the phone and use complete sentences. If you have small children, tell them stories about your own childhood, or invite their grandparents over to talk about life before cellphones, computers and the Internet.

Listen to music and dance

It will warm your body and your soul.

DON'T BE SAD

Not getting enough sunlight, particularly during the winter months, can be critical to our mental health. This seasonal lack of sunlight can affect the balance of melatonin and serotonin in our brain.

Serotonin is critical to our mental and physical wellbeing. It's responsible for regulating sleep patterns and it can also affect mood and appetite. For most of us, the next sunny day will be enough to brighten our spirits.

For some people, lack of sunlight can cause a serious condition known as Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD. The lack of sunlight results in an increase in melatonin production, and a decrease in serotonin production.

Women are four times more likely than men to suffer from SAD, but it can affect anyone at any age. SAD symptoms in children include irritability, difficulty getting out of bed and problems at school.

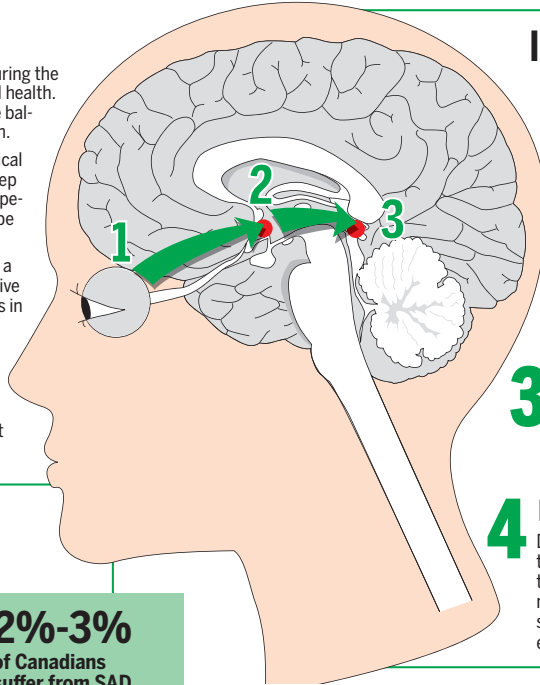
SAD SYMPTOMS

If the following symptoms recur for two winters or more, it may be time to seek professional help:

- Chronic fatigue
- Oversleeping
- Overeating and/or craving sweet or starchy foods
- Weight gain
- Headaches
- Difficulty concentrating
- Decreased energy
- Irritability
- Avoiding social situations
- Anxiety or despair
- Digestive disorders
- Chronic pain that doesn't respond to treatment
- In extreme cases, SAD patients may even become suicidal

2%-3%
of Canadians suffer from SAD (estimated).

15%
of Canadians may experience milder symptoms simply described as "the winter blues."



INSIDE THE BRAIN

1 EYES
As light comes into the eyes, the retinas send this information to the suprachiasmatic nucleus.

2 SUPRACHIASMATIC NUCLEUS
The brain's pacemaker, it receives signals from the eyes, which then make their way to the pineal gland.

3 PINEAL GLAND
Produces melatonin, which regulates the sleep/wake cycle, and is produced at night while sleeping. Sunlight shuts off its production.

4 MELATONIN IMBALANCE?
During the winter, people are exposed to less sunlight, which can cause the pineal gland to produce more melatonin. It's also possible that SAD sufferers become hypersensitive to its effects.

SAD TREATMENT

Mild symptoms

- Increase exposure to natural sunlight
- Sit near a window
- Install skylights or add lighting
- Exercise
- Maintain a regular sleep schedule (staying up late can disrupt your biological clock)
- Take a winter vacation (somewhere warm!)

Moderate to Severe Symptoms

- Light therapy
- Anti-depressants
- Counseling
- Cognitive therapy

If you suspect that you or a family member might be suffering from SAD, consult your family doctor for a referral to a qualified specialist. A diagnosis of SAD requires a professional evaluation by a psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker.

For more information, visit the Canadian Mental Health Association's website at www.cmha.ca.

Where there's light, there's hope

Light therapy consists of sitting in front of a specialized lamp or light box that produces between 5,000 and 10,000 lux of light. (By comparison, ordinary house lighting produces about 300 lux.) The light impacts on

the retina, the signal is transmitted via the optic nerve, eventually reaching the pineal gland. This gland controls the secretion of melatonin.

Light therapy has been shown to be more effective

than drug therapy in combating the effects of winter light deprivation. The price of light boxes ranges from \$200 to \$300.

The important thing to remember is that while symptoms do dissipate

quickly, so does the effect of the light therapy. In order to keep SAD symptoms at bay, sufferers must continue daily treatments of approximately 30 minutes a day, throughout the winter months.

Given our Canadian win-

ters, it's not surprising that the leader in SAD light technology is a Canadian company, Northern Light Technologies. The company offers a full range of specialized lamps, specifically designed for SAD sufferers.



A Northern Light Technologies SADelite lamp.

For more information: northernlighttechnologies.com • call toll-free 1-800-263-0066