

Beating the Winter Blues

by

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Have you ever noticed how alive we feel in springtime? New energy, enhanced productivity, and even euphoria come with the advent of spring. On the other hand, winter is known for a complex syndrome now called **Seasonal Affective Disorder**, or SAD. Fatigue, sluggishness, and depression are common health problems in northern climates during the winter.

The prevalence of SAD in the United States increases with increasing latitude. Its winter incidence ranges from 1.4% in Florida to 9.7% in New Hampshire. Recurrent mood disorders are common in both men and women during these months of relative darkness. People have a tendency to overeat, feel fatigued and lethargic. They may over sleep, crave carbohydrates, and gain weight. Vegetating in front of the television, leaving bills unpaid, and piling up laundry are obvious manifestations of this disease.

But Mainers have it much better than residents in Trømsø, Norway. Although that city of 45 thousand residents, living above the arctic circle, enjoys the midnight sun from May 21 to July 25, they know that on November 25 the sun will set, not to rise again until January 21. There are a few hours of midday grayness but Trømsø is locked in darkness for two full months in winter. Norwegians call this sunless period, *morketiden*—"the murky time."

The presence or absence of sunlight can influence how people think, feel, and behave. Body rhythms are affected including temperature, hormones, and sleep cycles.

The role of the pineal gland in light mediated events is now being intensely investigated. This small organ located deep in the brain produces a hormone called *melatonin*. This mysterious chemical is secreted in darkness and suppressed in natural light or bright artificial light. With animals, a decrease of melatonin is associated with an increase in fertility. This affects the mating cycle of many species, both birds and mammals.

On the positive side, athletes from the dark parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia—find higher percentages in the winner's circle for competitive winter sport events. Sports medicine experts concluded that the harsher lives for these athletes actually help them build endurance and determination.

A common physical symptom during these darker winter months is insomnia. *Melatonin* secretion probably plays a role. Large doses of this hormone induce sleepiness and decrease reaction time in some research studies. That accounts for its common useage as a sleep inducer. There are more physiologic ways to pass eight beneficial sleep hours with bed and pillow. Here are a few suggestions to help you beat the winter blues, to make your winter of short days maximally productive:

Regularity is vital for your hormonal functions. There is more than whimsical poetry in Ben Franklin's adage, "Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." Start your hours of sleep well before midnight. Healthful sleep inducers can be varied, such as an evening walk, a bedtime soak in the bathtub, a cup of herb tea, and the meditation reflection with an inspirational book or soft music.

What you do during the day time is just as important. Active physical **exercise** helps to induce the healthful fatigue that lets your muscles relax at bedtime. Keep your feet warm, and the bed whenever possible. Wear socks if you have too. A hot water bottle welcomes you when the bed is too cold. Herbal tea preparations of hops, catnip, or cammomile are natural remedies

to slow down the nervous system.

Avoid alcohol as a night cap or sedative. The brain waves don't work that well under the influence of hypnotic drugs or booze. Check to be sure there is some **fresh air** coming into your bedroom.

Some time each day, get out into the sunlight. Bright artificial lights may help in fighting the winter blues. Full spectrum fluorescent lights can reverse some symptoms of seasonal affective disorder. **Phototherapy** uses lights that are 5 to 10 times brighter than ordinary indoor light. This gives about much light as you would get if you stood at a window on a spring day. The desk type model from Northern Light Technologies delivers bright light by combining high output fluorescent tubes with a high performance parabolic reflector. There are many makes and models to choose from. Most important, however, is to get yourself outdoors. Walking, skating, skiing, or working—you may actually enjoy these frosty winter months, look forward to their beauty, and beat the winter blues.