Shedding Light on Winter Depression

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Thirty days hath September,
April, June and November,
All the rest have thirty-one
Except for February—
Which has 258!

We extend our apologies to the writer of this clever children’s rhyme for tampering with the last line. But for those of us who live up North, February is the teaser month. Once the busy-ness and the shopping and the visiting and the activity and the lights (especially the lights) of December are over, the dark seems really to set in. Somehow, psychologically, we think that half the winter is over with the celebration of the New Year. It’s not. Not even close. It’s been cold since late October and it’s likely to be cold—even snowing—until April. The afterglow of the holidays and even the decorations may last through much of January. But then February comes. Far from being a harbinger of spring, its coming means we’re only halfway there to warmth and light again. Its scarcity of days doesn’t help. It feels like the longest month of the year!

For those with “winter” depression, known as seasonal affective disorder or “SAD,” mid-winter is especially hard. Not only do they experience the symptoms of more general depression like sadness, a loss of energy, and irritability, they also may develop a craving for sugars and starches and experience a marked weight gain. The sadness in SAD typically begins in the fall or winter and ends in the spring. This type of seasonal depression is diagnosed as SAD only if it occurs during two or more winters. Not surprisingly, it is more and more common the farther away a person lives from the equator. Women seem more susceptible and it does tend to run in families.

Causes and Treatment of Winter Depression

Although there are a number of competing theories, it is generally believed that winter depression occurs in some people when they do not have sufficient exposure to sunlight. For this reason, the most common treatment for winter depression is “phototherapy,” or exposing the eyes each day to bright artificial light built into a special type of visor, lamp, or light box. Treatment administered in the morning, to mimic the natural beginning of the day, seems to be more effective than other times. The treatment appears to work for children and adolescents as well as adults.

Some relief from symptoms is generally experienced within four days of beginning treatment, and about half of those treated experience significant improvement after one week. Treatment must continue throughout the winter, however, since symptoms are likely to return if light exposure decreases or stops.

Unfortunately, some people experience side effects like eyestrain, headaches, and difficulty sleeping. But, generally, an adjustment in the intensity of the light or the frequency and timing of exposure will help.

Experts do recommend that people considering light therapy see an eye care professional as well as a medical or mental health professional before beginning treatment.

http://psychcentral.com/lib/shedding-light-on-winter-depression/000332?all=1
A light box certainly may help. A vacation in the tropics every February could help as well. Find a hot rock to rest on beneath sunny blue skies with the sound of waves lapping on the shore during the last two weeks of February, and the month will feel short again. If you time your return for March, you won’t have long to wait for the appearance of crocuses to keep you going.

For most of us, that’s only a fantasy. Maybe if we put on a CD of ocean sounds, look at pictures of gorgeous ocean beaches, and sip lemonade as we sit in front of a light box for a few hours, our sunshine-deprived systems will at least get the idea.

Sources


Resources

Banishing the Blues, by Bruce Charles Barr (Seattle, The Indoor Sun Shoppe, 2000).

