



Fighting Off the Winter Blues

Activity

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When winter approaches and the weather gets colder and the days get shorter, many people experience a noticeable change in their moods. They may oversleep, overeat, or experience depression, fatigue, or difficulty concentrating. Although these symptoms can have many causes, they often are the symptoms of a disease called seasonal affective disorder or SAD.

Who Suffers?

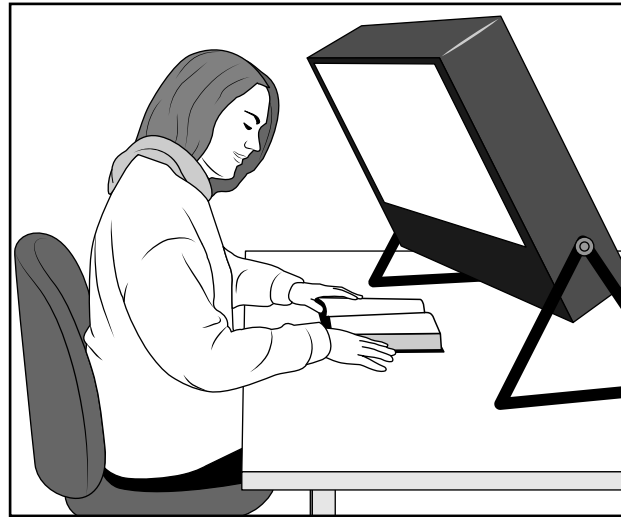
It is estimated that 10 million to 25 million Americans experience symptoms of SAD. People of all ages, occupations, and ethnic groups can suffer from SAD. Most sufferers, however, are women between the ages of 20 and 50. Almost four times as many women as men suffer from the disease.

Some people might have only a mild form of the disease. They might feel slightly depressed. They could oversleep and overeat. They might lack energy. Some people suffer from much stronger cases of SAD. Some can't concentrate during the winter. Some are totally nonproductive, lacking enough energy to do even the simplest tasks. They might withdraw from social contact and feel depressed constantly.

As winter ends, SAD sufferers begin to recover. Once again, they participate fully in their daily routines. Yet, year after year, SAD symptoms reappear in winter.

The Light Connection

Scientists are researching the causes of SAD. They think there is a link between SAD and the decreased amount of daylight available during



Light therapy helps people overcome the effects of SAD.

the winter. Light affects hormone levels. Some scientists think that it's this shortness of daylight hours that causes SAD.

Light Therapy

Researchers reason that if a lack of light causes SAD, light therapy could help SAD sufferers. Initial studies had groups of SAD patients sitting in front of light boxes for several hours a day before dawn and after dusk. The light boxes used a type of fluorescent light that's similar to the color range of natural summer sunlight.

The patients began to see positive changes soon after the treatments started. Their moods began to improve. They had more energy and felt able to carry on their everyday activities. The same patients were exposed to periods of dim light as well. The dim-light therapy proved to be ineffective.

Applying Critical Thinking Skills

1. People who live in the higher latitudes are more likely to suffer from SAD than people who live in the lower latitudes. Why do you think this is?
2. SAD patients using light therapy can suffer from side effects such as headache, eyestrain, and sleeplessness. What might be done to reduce these side effects?