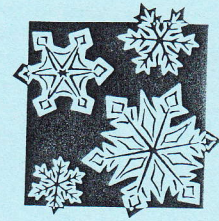




The Winter Blues: Seasonal Affective Disorder



- What is Winter Seasonal Affective Disorder?

A disorder that is characterized by affective episodes (i.e., depression) recurring regularly during certain seasons.¹

- What are the Symptoms of SAD?

The symptoms include: increased eating, carbohydrate craving, over-sleeping, difficulty getting out of bed in the morning, social withdrawal, impaired work functioning, decreased energy, irritability, and fatigue. The symptoms are frequently mild to moderate in nature. The symptoms are regularly occurring fall-winter depressions that have happened for at least two consecutive winters.¹ Coinciding with changes in lighting and climate, the signs begin around the end of October/ beginning of November and continue through the end of March/ beginning of April.²

- Possible Causes of SAD

The most commonly accepted theory to date is that SAD is caused by light deficiency in winter. There is an increased production of the hormone melatonin in winter in response to the increasing periods of darkness.² Researchers have found that exposure to bright light during winter months has an anti-depressant effect in humans.^{3, 4}

- What is Phototherapy?

Phototherapy involves the use of an artificial light device (such as the Counseling Center's Sun Box) to simulate natural full-spectrum light. Studies have shown that by artificially increasing the amount of full-spectrum light a person receives, an anti-depressant effect occurs.⁵

Research has also shown that the anti-depressant effects of phototherapy work by receiving light through the eye and not from skin reception.⁶ With the Sun Box, it should be placed directly in front of the individual and their eyes should be open. It should not be necessary to look directly into the Sun Box.⁷

- How Much Phototherapy?

The amount of necessary phototherapy depends upon the individual's needs. Some experimentation will occur before the right schedule is found. The duration generally runs from about 45 minutes to an hour. The number of times a week phototherapy is done is also up to the needs of the individual.⁷

- Research Supporting Phototherapy

- ❖ Levy et al (1980) was the first to discover that phototherapy did in fact have an anti-depressant effect on individuals with SAD.⁹
- ❖ Rosenthal et al (1985) found similar results to Levy et al and also found that full-spectrum light was the most effective.⁵
- ❖ 40-50% of patients w/ SAD in one study improved dramatically after only one week of therapy. It was also found that therapy had to be continuous, or the anti-depressant effects faded quickly.⁸

- Possible Side Effects of Phototherapy

The most common side effects found are eyestrain, headaches, irritability, and insomnia. All of these are easily remedied by either changing the schedule of phototherapy or by increasing the distance between the individual and the light.

- If You Think YOU Might Have SAD...

If you find that you meet the criterion listed here and are interested in the possibility of receiving phototherapy, the first step is to make an appointment with one of the counselors. They can be reached at X4416.