

Ottawa SUN

Chasing away those mid-winter blues...

By SUZANNE ELSTON, SPECIAL TO QMI AGENCY

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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 midwinter 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 that you know the difference between the shampoo and conditioner before you start.

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. (No sunscreen required!)

Take the time to rediscover the joy of conversation

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

Listen to music and dance like nobody's watching

It will warm your body and your soul. Before you know it, Spring will be here!

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 our moods and our 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. An estimated 2 to 3 percent of Canadians suffer from SAD. An additional 15 per cent of Canadians may experience milder symptoms simply described as "the winter blues."

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 school problems. This could help explain why your child has trouble making it out of the door in time to catch the school bus during the winter months.

SAD Symptoms

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, SAD can be difficult to diagnose, because the symptoms are similar to other forms of depression. A key marker is timing. 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. 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 [HYPERLINK "http://www.cmha.ca" www.cmha.ca.](http://www.cmha.ca)

SAD Treatment

Mild symptoms

- Increase exposure to natural sunlight
- Take a walk in the sunshine (without sunglasses)
- Sit near a window
- Install skylights or adding lighting
- Exercise
- Maintain a regular sleep schedule (staying up late can disrupt your biological clock)
- Take a winter vacation (in the warm!)

Moderate to Severe Symptoms

- Light therapy
- Anti-depressants
- Counselling
- Cognitive therapy

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 winters, 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.

For more information, check out [HYPERLINK "http://www.northernlighttechnologies.com"](http://www.northernlighttechnologies.com)

www.northernlighttechnologies.com or call toll-free 1-800-263-0066.

<http://www.ottawasun.com/life/greenplanet/2010/01/19/12527166-qmi.html>