

## Archives Health

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### **A brighter outlook for SAD patients**

By Stephen Ravenscraft

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The days are graying and the sun will soon disappear like the Cubs in post-season.

Winter in Chicago, for me, is like an ominous shroud of despair. I've experienced everything from the blahs and doldrums to the most serious of depressions, lasting from weeks to months depending on the depth of my struggle.

Like many, I wrestle with the often unrecognized and sometimes debilitating seasonal affective disorder, also known as SAD. Recurring depression is the most prominent symptom of SAD, which effects 6 to 9 percent of the Chicago-area population, according to Michael Young, an associate professor at the Institute of Psychology at the Illinois Institute of Technology. In most cases, a fall or winter seasonal onset is followed by a spontaneous springtime remission.

It is believed that SAD is connected to the part of the brain that controls our sleep, mood, activity and sex drive—the hypothalamus. Natural light stimulates the hypothalamus, and in the SAD patient the reduction of natural light can cause these normal functions to slow and even shut down.

The good news is that recent studies have indicated that cognitive behavioral therapy is a promising approach to dealing with SAD. In simple terms, coping skills can be learned that will help those who suffer with SAD.

The approach uses a limited number of therapy sessions to help patients develop skills to adjust their thinking. It can be combined with a disciplined routine of daily natural light therapy, regular therapy sessions, and even daily doses of prescribed anti-depressants.

And, yes, rigorous exercise and a healthy diet remain essential to the treatment. But cognitive behavioral therapy is gaining fans as an important tool.

A study led by Dr. Kelly Rohan at the University of Vermont found that subjects learning and applying the skills of CBT were the most successful and experienced remission of the symptoms of SAD on a much higher level than those who used either only light therapy or drugs. Combining CBT with light therapy showed the most dramatic success, a remission rate of 71 to 87 percent, according to the study, published in the June 2007 issue of the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. "However, over the long term," says Rohan, "those who used CBT alone were the most successful, indicating that patients using CBT could maintain stability through the onset and duration of SAD."

One of the elements of CBT, according to Rohan's study, is scheduling pleasant activities in order to develop wintertime interests and counteract behavioral disengagement. "It's imperative that those who suffer through the winter develop a positive sense of the season and the opportunity it brings rather than the overwhelming sense of dread that so often accompanies the late and early months of the calendar," Rohan said.

I always sensed the effect of winter but never anticipated the intensity of darkness it would bring. Now, however, I'm learning to anticipate the season and its new opportunities. It's now a time to focus on some of my interests that I can pursue inside, such as watercolor painting, reading and catching up on indoor house chores.

I've gone the route of the traditional treatment for SAD and it certainly has been a great help. This year my plan is to turn my light box on every day and soak up all the good it has to offer. Along with the light therapy, regular exercise and wintertime interests, I plan to apply what I've learned in a year's worth of therapy sessions that have given me insight to counteract the negative thought processes I tend to develop when my SAD begins.

If you choose to explore this type of treatment, work with a professional and licensed therapist to help develop and maintain the cognitive skills needed to cope with the onset and duration of winter depression. The treatment process is normally administered in 12-20 sessions, and once the skills of CBT are learned it's more like practicing a lifestyle—you'll learn to shift your thinking from the distorted conclusions of the depressed mind to the practical and balanced thinking of spring or summer.

With winter nearing, I'm prepping myself with all of the tools and skills I have acquired to manage it well. And with CBT as one of the new tools I've acquired, I hope it's one more reason to look forward to winter rather than dread it.

Let the light in during winter's gloom

Light therapy is an effective way to stave off the effects of seasonal affective disorder. A basic light box costs about \$100 to \$300 and works best if used daily, for at least 30 minutes.

The model I use, the NatureBright SunTouch Plus Ion/Light SAD Therapy (\$129, Walgreens), emits negative ions. In the winter especially, our air-tight homes tend to seal out negative ions. Computer terminals, fluorescent lighting, forced-air systems and some newer building materials generate an abundance of positive ions. Positive ions make us feel tired, depressed and irritable. Studies at Columbia University and the New York State Psychiatric Institute have demonstrated that high-density negative ionizers can act as an antidepressant for patients with SAD and the positive effect is like that of antidepressant medication.

—S.R.