

## WINTER BLUES

by Rebecca A. Stanwyck, LCSW

January 2006

When the days get shorter does your energy sag? Does the stormy weather bring on dark moods? Do you crave sweets and starchy food more, or just want to stay in bed during the winter months? If you tend to feel tired and blue at this time of year, you may have **Seasonal Affective Disorder**, or **SAD**.

It's normal to feel a little low once the frenzy of holiday activities is over (and the credit card bills begin to arrive); but SAD is more than just a post-holiday letdown. People with this disorder experience true symptoms of depression, such as: a change in appetite, a drop in energy level, fatigue, a desire to sleep more than usual, irritability, and/or avoidance of social situations.

SAD is caused by the body's reaction to seasonal changes in the amount of available sunlight, therefore these symptoms tend to intensify during the winter months and disappear in spring, and they reoccur at about the same time every year, unlike other forms of depression.

While the primary cause of SAD seems to be lack of sunlight, there may be other factors, such as the effect of spending more time indoors in dry, overheated environments, lack of exercise, or the increase in mold and mildew that occurs in damp, rainy weather. SAD is more common in northern areas than in California, where we usually are blessed with plenty of sunshine.

**The best treatment for SAD is exposure to natural sunlight**, preferably first thing in the morning, for 15 minutes to an hour a day. If it's dark outside when you go to work, and dark again by the time you get home, then you might try to take a "sunshine" break during the middle of the day. Go for a short walk, or sit in the sun to eat your lunch. It's most beneficial for sunlight to indirectly enter your eyes, so you can stay bundled up if it's cold, but remove the dark glasses, though of course you never want to look directly into the sun.

If you have severe seasonal affective disorder, try "light therapy". **Light therapy has been in use since the 1980s, and is now considered the standard treatment for SAD.** It involves sitting in front of a special "light box" that is constructed of high intensity fluorescent bulbs covered with a plastic screen that blocks out harmful ultraviolet (UV) rays. The light box can be set on a table or desk, and you sit in front of it with your eyes open, but not staring directly into it. Most people find they can read, watch TV, or use their computer while using their light box.

Simply sitting in front of a lamp in your living room won't do the trick. Indoor lights don't provide the type or intensity of light that's necessary to treat SAD. There are several kinds of light boxes available on the market, as well as other products that claim to treat seasonal affective disorder, but not all of them are effective, so it's best to get a recommendation from a physician or mental health professional who is knowledgeable in treating depression.

Light boxes don't work for everyone; sometimes anti-depressant medication is more effective. Other things that can help include dietary changes (reducing intake of carbohydrates, especially sugars, and increasing protein); physical exercise, even for only 15-20 minutes a day; and supportive psychotherapy. For more information on SAD, contact the National Mental Health Information Center at (800) 789-2647 or go to [www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov), or call me!

REBECCA A. STANWYCK, LCSW

[www.rebeccastanwyck.com](http://www.rebeccastanwyck.com)

510-881-2540