

It's that time of the year — the days are getting a little shorter, the mornings are crisper and the leaves are in the midst of beautiful, colorful changes. The time change is just around the corner and as New England residents, this season is invigorating, yet marks the passage to darker, drearier and much colder days. The ending of Daylight Savings Time yields darker mornings, earlier evenings and more time indoors.

When the weather is sunny and bright, people tend to feel more upbeat and positive. When the weather is gloomy, cold and dismal, moods tend to slump and often people feel a little down. However, for certain individuals these mood shifts develop into a type of depression that accompanies seasonal changes and affects their ability to function normally. Recurrent episodes of clinical depression that surface during seasonal changes, particularly winter, are referred to as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

One in five northern residents and one in four fibromyalgia sufferers experience SAD symptoms. Over 20 million Americans experience varying levels of SAD, also known as winter depression, and more than 10% of these individuals live right here in the northeast. More than likely if you are reading this, you may experience symptoms that become noticeable at the onset of fall: feelings of mild depression, seasonal weight gain, listlessness, the inability to wake up in the morning, and a decrease in libido.

The root source of SAD is a chemical imbalance in the brain, particularly within the hypothalamus. The hypothalamus is the part of the brain that governs the primary functions of the body such as appetite, temperature, sleep, sex drive, mood and activities. The hypothalamus is stimulated by natural light entering the eye and striking the retina. When the days are short and sunlight is reduced, the hypothalamus has to adjust its response to the various body mechanisms, slowing down these functions.

In the fall and winter months the brain produces more melatonin than serotonin and the production of vitamin D slumps with the lack of exposure to the sun. Melatonin is the regulatory chemical that adjusts sleep patterns, and in an abundant state, induces melancholy feelings, an inability to get out of bed in the dark mornings and increases in carbohydrate cravings. The lack of natural sunshine in the fall and winter months inhibits the production of serotonin — the “happy” chemical — which reaches its lowest levels in December and January. The chemical imbalances that accompany shorter days instill a sense of foreboding, unease and mild depression that is often hard to shake.

Symptoms of seasonal affective disorder associated with depression can affect daily living and should not be ignored. It is best to work with your physician or holistic practitioner to identify and determine the most appropriate methods of treatment. Treatment options include light therapy,

psychotherapy, natural herbal, homeopathic and vitamin therapy, diet and exercise modifications, aromatherapy, conventional drugs or a combination of any of these approaches.

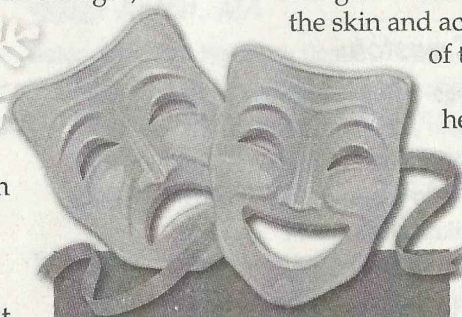
One of the greatest remedies for individuals who suffer from winter blues is the use of light therapy. Full spectrum light lamps or “happy lamps” emit natural light similar to that from the sun, minus the harmful UVA and UVB rays that are linked to skin cancer and other ailments. Full spectrum light allows the body to produce vitamin D naturally. Vitamin D deficiency is also linked with increases in osteoporosis and breast cancer, both of which have higher incidences in the northern parts of the US. Varying color tints or narrow spectrum light is used to treat insomnia naturally, while blue and red lights are now being used in skin care practices to treat acne by soothing the skin and activating the antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties of the skin that reduce breakouts and promote healing.

Counseling and cognitive-behavioral therapy can be very helpful and provide support during the difficult months, as well as help with lifestyle changes. Conventional drugs for the treatment of SAD include antidepressant medications such as Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil or Celexa. While these may be beneficial in the short term, pharmaceuticals can cause many unpleasant side effects, and their long term use effects are still unknown.

Supplementation with vitamin D, a B-complex and 5-HTP can be quite effective in minimizing SAD symptoms. 5-HTP acts as a precursor to serotonin and will help balance the levels of serotonin and melatonin in the body. A low fat, low carb diet that is rich in leafy greens and lean proteins is helpful. Moderate, daily exercise can increase energy and regulate sleep patterns.

Herbal and homeopathic remedies can provide harmony in the body to better balance your moods and feelings without the side effects and potential for dependency associated with synthetic drugs. Another very popular and effective approach is the use of aromatherapy. Essential oils of lemon, grapefruit and geranium are well known for their anti-depressant properties and may be introduced into the environment by means of oil diffusers, space sprays, in a bath oil or during massage.

Darker, shorter days do not necessarily doom New Englanders to SAD winter blues. With a few modifications and simple treatment, happiness and contentment can flow all season long.



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Melissa Gallagher is a naturopath and founder of Healing Being, LLC, which offers a complete line of organic, alternative health and wellness products including *Sunshine in a Box*, a natural SAD relief kit. Please visit HealthyBeingProducts.com/sad.html for information or call (727) 954-8968.