



## **MOOD DISORDERS ASSOCIATION OF MANITOBA INC.**

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### **SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER** **What Happens When The Lights Go Down?**

**SEASONAL** -- Describes the changes in **MOOD** and/or **BEHAVIOR** shown during the autumn and winter seasons.

**AFFECTIVE** -- A psychiatric term for **MOOD**.

**DISORDER** -- An upset of "normal" function.

People may not show symptoms of SAD until they experience lack of bright light due to a decrease in daytime hours. Research shows that bright light makes a difference to the brain chemistry that in turn affects the internal body clock. SAD appears to be a disorder of that clock. The exact causes are not yet known although researchers do know it is not a psychosomatic or imaginary illness.

The symptoms of SAD or "winter depression" are many and varied. People may experience:

- Feelings of sadness, anxiety, hopelessness
- Loss of physical energy, feeling lethargic, tired all the time
- Changes in sleeping or eating habits
- Thinking or memory impairment, or poor concentration
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, low self-esteem
- Avoidance of human contact
- Muscle aches and pains

For the person who is significantly affected and because some physical problems can show up as a depressive state, an assessment should be made by the family doctor. If there is nothing wrong physically and a person thinks they might have SAD, they can be referred to a psychiatrist who is aware of the disorder and in turn, can be referred to a SAD clinic. In practice, however, many people self-diagnose and self-treat. If one does self-treat, it is a good idea to mention this to one's GP.

It stands to reason that since the cause of SAD or the "Winter Blues" is lack of light, the main way of controlling the disorder would be by using light treatment, sometimes called *phototherapy*, every day.

Although there are no indications that light treatment causes eye damage, if you do have eye problems, it is advisable to check with an eye specialist before using the light.

A fluorescent light box is the best-studied bright light therapy device. Patients may purchase or rent a light box and use it in their homes. The usual dose of light is 10,000 LUX, where "lux" is a measurement of light intensity (indoor light is usually less than 400 lux; a cloudy day about 3000 lux; a sunny day is 50,000 lux or more).

The preferred level of light is about as bright as a spring morning on a clear day. For most, sitting in front of a light box at a sensible distance, allowing the light to reach the eyes for about 30 minutes daily, generally in the early morning hours, is sufficient to alleviate symptoms. It is important to note that the timing and length of exposure per day are highly individual.

Since a substantial amount of light is needed, the distance from the lights to your eyes needs to be monitored - close enough to give the best amount of light but distant enough to not hurt your eyes. The user does not have to stare at the light but can watch TV or read or do similar activities, just allowing the light to reach the eyes.

A small number of people experience headaches, irritability or in very rare cases nausea. Moving further away from the light and placing it at an angle can often solve these problems.

People have questioned whether light treatment could be a placebo (something that does nothing but make the patient feel better because they expect it to). But Seasonal Affective Disorder and light treatment continue to be researched by leading academics, medical experts and scientists in many countries. Even if it is a placebo, many people have found that light treatment makes them feel better and that is the most important thing.

**"TREAT IT - DEFEAT IT."**