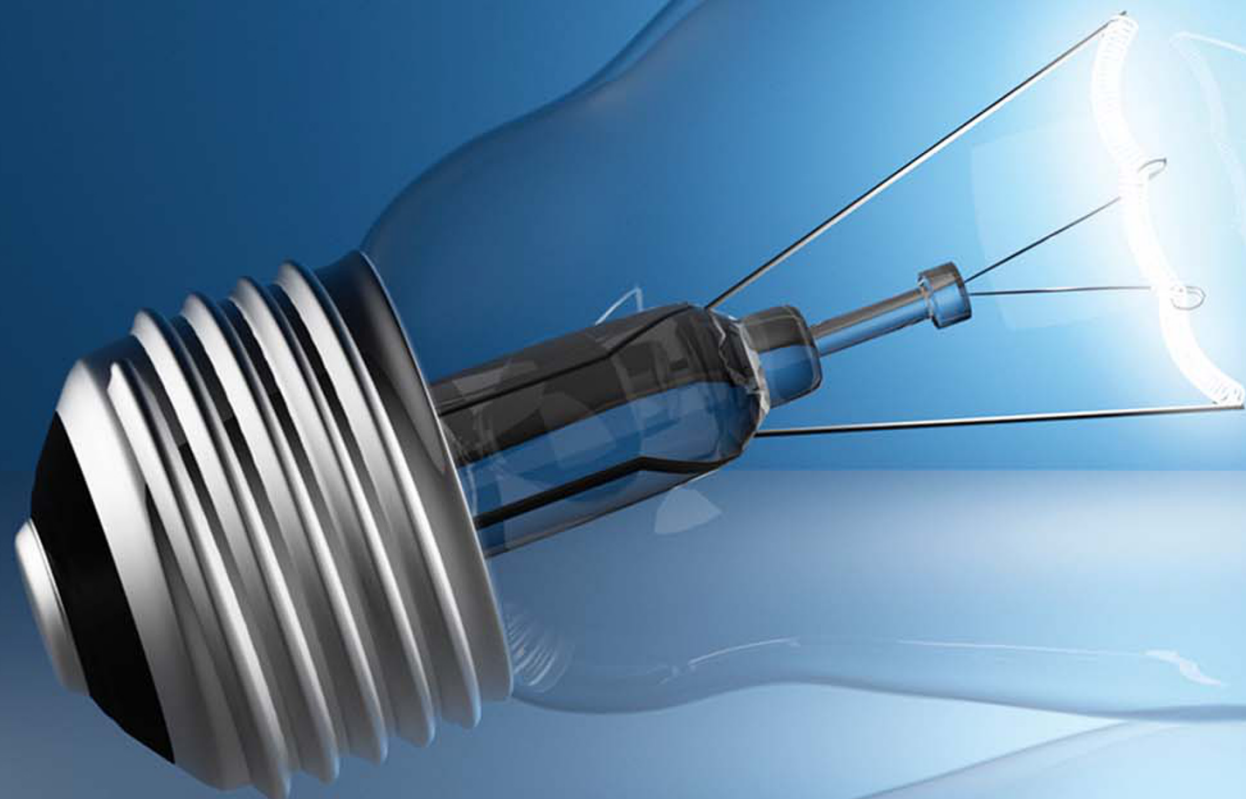


Look on the light side of life

SAD sufferers can combat their symptoms with light therapy, says **Arveen Bajaj**.



Seasonal Affective Disorder

The weather in the spring is a little unpredictable, as is the weather in the UK in general. There could be rain, wind or snow and maybe if you're lucky a little sunshine. Having managed to pull ourselves through the winter months when it's dark when you get up in the morning and just as dark when you get home in the evening, it's hardly surprising that we might suffer the odd bout of winter blues.

However, for one in 50 people in the UK, this feeling of depression is not just the odd bout but constant throughout this time of year when exposure to daylight is limited.

For sufferers of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) – a condition where you develop symptoms of depression at the same time each year such as feeling miserable, tired, low and demotivated – the winter months cannot pass fast enough.

Lack of light

Research has shown that bright light makes a difference to brain chemistry, but it is not clear exactly what the effect is. One theory is that light stimulates a part of the brain called the hypothalamus which controls mood, appetite and sleep. In people with SAD, lack of light and a problem with certain brain chemicals prevents the hypothalamus from working properly.

Symptoms usually develop some time between September and November and continue until March or April and tend to be worse in December, January and February. SAD is less common in countries near to the equator where the hours of sunlight are more constant and bright throughout the year.

According to light therapy expert Carol Barksfield, Managing Director of The SAD Lightbox Company, research shows that in the last half of the twentieth century the light reaching the earth reduced by as much as 2-3% – and those of us who work in offices and shops, with tinted glass and deliberately low levels of lighting, seem to be shutting out even more natural light.

'Our body clocks really do react to light – and as a result, light can be used to help improve how we feel and how we function'

Carol explains: 'the effects are very real and are well-recognised by the medical community into how our bodies adapt – or struggle – when we are deprived of light. Our body clocks really do react to light – and as a result, light can be used to help improve how we feel and how we function, particularly in the winter months when there is less natural light around us.'

Symptoms

Carol says that although we are all more conscious of light – or lack of it – in the darker autumn and winter months, she sees people all year round displaying symptoms of tiredness, lethargy, sugar cravings, depression and a general decline in their well-being.

She adds that being deprived of the light can affect us in lots of ways. It can cause jet lag, post-natal depression (or pre-natal anticipation!), sugar or carbohydrate cravings, sleep problems – where we are unable to 'close down' our minds to drift off to sleep or waking too early and not able to go back to sleep – and changing shift patterns which can affect sleep, metabolism, and your temperament generally.

So what can you do to get you out of the dark daytime doldrums? Natural sunlight helps, so you could go for a walk outside every day. However, this may not be practical for most who work all day inside.

Light therapy

Some studies have shown that light therapy can help. The treatment consists of sitting in front of a special bright light for a session each day. By replacing the bright sunlight which you normally see in the summer, it can help your body adjust better and alleviate symptoms.

Lightboxes have been designed to counteract the negative effects of light deprivation by supplementing the amount of natural light available and can be used at work or at home. According to Carol, simply using a lightbox for 20 minutes to an hour a day (preferably mornings) will increase your energy levels and can help reset the body clock.

'Waking up to a regular alarm clock can be such a shock to the system,' she says. 'Up to 85% of SAD cases can be improved by using light therapy so it makes sense to have your sunshine supplement as you wake up.'

As the lamp in the lightbox brightens gradually your body automatically responds to the increasing light and you awake feeling refreshed and invigorated. For example, with the DawnLite (pictured below), instead of being shaken awake in the dark winter months with a noisy radio or bleeper, the DawnLite will naturally and gradually increase the light in the room to replicate a summer dawn.

Lifestyle changes

Health experts say there are a number of simple lifestyle changes you can make to help improve your symptoms. Aside from getting out in the natural light for walks, you can make your work and home environments as light and bright as possible, sit near windows when indoors, eat a healthy, well-balanced diet, avoid putting yourself into stressful situations, and talk to your friends about your condition, so that they can understand why your behaviour changes in the winter months.

For more details on SAD contact the Seasonal Affective Disorder Association via www.sada.org.uk, the SAD Lightbox Company www.sad.uk.com and www.sad.org.uk.

