

Light up your life

Autumn is a time when nature prepares to rest and many people begin to withdraw into themselves too. They have no desire to meet with friends after work, preferring to sit lethargically in front of the television before going to bed early. And the next morning they find it hard to get up, too.

For most people, this period of languor passes without any major effects but a small minority suffer from out-and-out winter depression. Apart from lethargy and fatigue, the latter group often has symptoms uncharacteristic of depressive disorder.

"They have an increased need for sleep and also for carbohydrates like chocolate," says Dieter Kunz, a chronobiologist and head doctor in a hospital sleep-medicine department in Berlin. Normally, depression is accompanied by insomnia and loss of appetite.

In Kunz's estimation, 3 to 5 percent of Germany's population suffer from winter depression. And another 25 percent are conscious of mood changes.

"These are the same mechanisms that take effect in animals before hibernation," Kunz says. The mechanisms are no longer functional in humans, however, because humans are supplied with food all year round.

True winter depression exists when the symptoms occur repeatedly in autumn and winter. "Moreover, the disorder has to last at least two weeks," says Professor Ulrich Hegerl, from the Leipzig-based German Research Network on Depression and Suicidality.

Light deprivation during the cold months is the cause of people's depression. "Scientists believe that light controls the melatonin system and influences the serotonin system," says Professor Ulrich Voderholzer, chairman of the Berlin-based German Society of Psychiatry, Psychotherapy and Neurology (DGPPN).

The neurotransmitter melatonin regulates the sleep-wake cycle and the need for sleep. Serotonin, on the other hand, stimulates the body and brightens people's mood.

Symptoms of winter depression typically begin for northern hemisphere countries in October, November or December, and abate in January.

"The symptoms decrease when the days grow longer again," Voderholzer says. Since light blocks the secretion of melatonin, sufferers should spend as much time outdoors as possible.

"Exercise is also a tested remedy for depression," Voderholzer adds. A regular sleep-wake cycle can help too, and sufferers should stick to it even at weekends. By getting up early, they are exposed to more daylight regardless of the weather.

"Even a gray, overcast sky has about 10,000 lux," Kunz notes, using a standard unit of illumination. On a bright, sunny day, natural luminosity can be as high as several hundred thousand lux.

To receive the greatest benefit from sunlight, Kunz says, people should look into the sky, though not directly at the sun. He stresses that every moment outdoors is important and he even suggests that each morning people should get off the bus a stop earlier and walk the rest of the way to work.

Natural light is relatively weak indoors, even on sunny days.



A jog or even a walk in the open air can do wonders for your health and state of mind.
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"Only a fraction of the light passes through the window," Hegerle says.

If you don't have time to go outside regularly you can brighten your mood with a light-therapy lamp, which you sit in front of, with eyes open. This should not be considered equal to time spent outside, though. Light-therapy lamps often have a lesser luminosity than even the grayest of days.

Tanning-bed sessions, during which eyes must be closed to prevent damage, are not a suitable remedy, though.

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