

Seasonal Affective Disorder: Let the Sun Shine In

Be Well, Massage Magazine

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Introduction

Approximately thirty five million people in the U.S. experience some form of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), caused by the lack of sunlight, typically during the months of September through April, and the farther you live from the equator, the greater your chances of experiencing inadequate sunshine. Approximately 60 – 90 % affected by this cyclical depressive disorder are women and children. A 1998 study showed at least 3 % school age children in the U.S. may be affected. (*Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 1998; 37: 218-220).

SAD symptoms range from mild to severe and include difficulty getting up in the morning, lethargy, concentration problems, irritability, and cravings for comfort foods (foods high in sugar, salt and fat), and external stimulants (coffee and chocolate); to tearfulness, social withdrawal, diminished sex drive, low self-esteem, weight gain and depression. However, all symptoms fade with the onset of longer days of sunshine in the spring and summer.

A major protective effect of sunlight is the production of vitamin D by the body which is only synthesized in the presence of ultraviolet B. Vitamin D is responsible for maintaining normal calcium and phosphorus blood levels; aids in calcium absorption and bone mineralization thereby helping to prevent osteoporosis and tooth decay. Vitamin D

is associated with improving several health conditions such as arthritis, diabetes, fatigue, heart disease, obesity, infertility and PMS. Recent research shows that sunlight may actually protect you from specific cancers, as these appear to be strongly associated with a lack of sunlight. (Cancer March 2002 84: 1867-75) Vitamin D may be obtained by taking supplemental cod liver oil, as well as sufficient sunlight exposure.

Holistic Solutions: Aromatherapy

SAD sufferers often have decreased levels of serotonin (a chemical produced by the pituitary responsible for modulating mood, emotion, sleep and appetite) and high levels of melatonin. These neuro-hormones produced by the brain can alter the body's internal clock. Utilizing essential oils that stimulate and regulate specific areas of the brain can be helpful in alleviating SAD. Three important regulating essential oils traditionally used are bergamot, frankincense and geranium. In addition, essential oil therapy that targets serotonin production is extremely beneficial and includes chamomile, lavender and marjoram. Citrus derived oils can also be useful for their uplifting and positive affect. The oils are naturally found in the citrus fruit's outer peel, where the sun's light rays are absorbed to ripen the fruit and store up the sun's powerful energy. One of my favorite blends for the mid-winter doldrums is shared here and is a citrus fresh reminder of longer, sunnier days ahead. One of the best ways to enjoy aromatherapy, especially when the objective is to stimulate the brain or limbic system, is via inhalation. An electric diffuser is the most therapeutic, while an aroma lamp, room spray, or simply inhaled from a tissue are simpler methods that are also effective.

(Recipe)

Pacific Island Retreat

6 drops Lavender essential oil

6 drops Lemongrass essential oil

3 drops Ylang ylang essential oil

(Holistic Solutions: Hydrotherapy)

Hydrotherapy, in the form of an aromatic therapeutic bath, is an excellent remedy for creating a euphoric mood, stimulating the brain and relaxing the entire body. If your skin is dry, which is very common in the winter months, you may want to use organic heavy cream as the carrier base for the recipe given above for a luxurious spa soak.

Alternatively, natural sea salt, baking soda or Epsom salt can be used by adding the drops of oils onto the salts before adding to the warm bath water. These salts will be a bit drying to the skin, but possess relaxing and detoxifying properties.

Holistic Solutions: Flower Essence Therapy

Flower essence therapy, also known as Bach Flower or Alaskan Flower Essence remedies among other brand names, can be effective and have a direct association with sunlight and SAD. For example, Sunflower essence stores energy from sunlight; Single Delight flower essence helps alleviate feelings of isolation in times of darkness, while Grass of Parnassus essence helps to receive nourishment from non-visible light. A few drops taken under the tongue or in a glass of water are usually recommended, but they can also be applied externally by blending them in massage oils, lotions and creams or as a special addition to your spa bath. Flower essences can be broadcasted in your

immediate environment by placing several drops in a water fountain, humidifier or room spray as well.

Holistic Solutions: Diet

There are a few dietary changes that can help SAD conditions by supporting the thyroid, easing depression and supplementing the body with additional vitamin D. Cod liver and fish oils are rich in Omega 3 and are associated with decreasing mild states of depression and can be useful in SAD for this reason. They also provide rich sources of vitamin D, so eating more fish is a good idea. Incorporating seaweed, such as nori, wakame and dulse, into your diet supports a healthy thyroid gland and because of its natural iodine source, has proven to combat winter blues and SAD.

Holistic Solutions: Exercise

Exercise and deep breathing are important for all types of stress and elevating mood, including SAD. Plan daily walks first thing in the morning or on your lunch break and keep in mind even on cloudy days, you will experience more diffused sunlight outside than you will indoors. Plan outdoor activities and avoid human hibernation by planning events with friends and family. Think about hosting a party in the middle of winter. Perhaps a summer luau party in February? Frequent your gym more often and using the sauna can be beneficial.

Holistic Solutions: Lifestyle

Be creative and resourceful when it comes to transforming your surroundings. You may want to invest in several full spectrum lights or a light box for your home or office. Full spectrum lights can uplift your mood and improve your health because they help to compensate for the loss of sunlight exposure to your skin. On a bright sunny day you are subject to nearly 70,000 lux, or units of light, on cloudy days close to 5,000 and only 15 to 200 lux indoors under typical office or home lighting. These light therapy lamps and special light bulbs do a lot to diminish SAD severity but do not alleviate the condition. I personally use a 10,000 lux light box in my office on a daily basis during the winter months as I live in the Pacific Northwest. You may also find painting your common areas in lighter colors, change the window coverings to allow more light to filter in or move your desk or work area closer to a window to be helpful. Considered a much milder form of light therapy, sitting and staring into the bright flames of a fire, such as a fireplace or even a candle, provides your eyes with beneficial luminous energy.

Conclusion

By being open to new ideas and natural integrative approaches, and letting the sun shine in (from within and without), is the most powerful prevention there is for alleviating seasonal affective disorder. Be well.