**Tips for Managing Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) in Seattle
(You are not alone!)**

**Signs and symptoms:** Seasonal affective disorder is cyclical—usually causing depressive periods during the dark months and non-depressed periods during lighter months. Other symptoms of SAD include sleeping more than usual, having less energy, losing interest in activities, an inability to focus and think clearly, and increased appetite. Many people who move to Seattle are affected by our dark winters – especially the first time they go through one. Even if you don’t have full blown SAD, some of the below tips may be helpful for managing “the dark days.”

**Diagnosis:** Because SAD is a form of depression, if you feel your symptoms are affecting your life noticeably, you should check in with a professional. A primary care or mental health provider will be able to determine whether you have SAD or some other form of depression. If you do have SAD, psychotherapy can help you work through and manage it. Below are some other tips:

**Light therapy:**

* Maximize your exposure to **daylight**. Make your living space brighter – keep your blinds and curtains open during the day, and use bright colors on walls and light-colored upholstery if possible. Get up early to take advantage of as much daylight as possible. Sit near a window at work if you can. [Get outside](http://www.everydayhealth.com/news/calming-power-nature/) as much as possible during the day and take advantage of what sunlight there is. Even if it is cold or rainy, dress appropriately (Gore-Tex! Umbrellas! Cool rubber boots!) and take a stroll around the block at noon or so — when the sun is brightest.
* **Light boxes** give off light that mimics sunshine. The light is significantly brighter than that of regular light bulbs and is provided in different wavelengths. Typically, if you have SAD, you should sit in front of a light box for about 30 minutes a day, often first thing in the morning (for instance, while eating breakfast). This will stimulate your body's circadian rhythms and suppress its natural release of [melatonin](http://www.everydayhealth.com/melatonin/guide/).
* **Dawn simulators** can help some [people with seasonal affective disorder](http://www.everydayhealth.com/depression/seasonal-depression-and-bipolar.aspx). These devices are alarm clocks, but rather than waking you abruptly with music or beeping, they produce light that gradually increases in intensity, just like the sun. Different models of dawn simulators are available, but the best ones use full-spectrum light, which is closest to natural sunlight.

**Routine:** People who live with SAD often have [trouble sleeping](http://www.everydayhealth.com/columns/therese-borchard-sanity-break/ways-beat-insomnia-get-better-sleep/) at night and getting up in the morning. Maintaining a regular schedule improves sleep, which can help alleviate symptoms of SAD. Keeping a regular schedule will also expose you to light at consistent and predictable times, and eating at regular intervals can help you not overeat.

**Sleep:** Getting enough sleep also helps regulate mood. See separate handout on “Sleep Hygiene” for tips if you have trouble sleeping.

**Exercise**: As it does with other [forms of depression](http://www.everydayhealth.com/depression-pictures/different-types-of-depression.aspx), exercise that gets your heart rate up can help alleviate SAD. Brisk walking is the easiest way to get this effect. Outdoor exercise is most helpful, but if you can't get outside, choose a treadmill, stationary bike, or elliptical machine close to a window.

**Engage** in activities that you make you happy. Volunteer, take a class, spend time with friends and family members who are caring, supportive, and positive. Some great indoor winter activities include: reading, knitting, watching movies, playing board games, basking by the fireplace, getting a massage, foot reflexology or acupuncture, playing or listening to music, or hanging out in one of the gazillion Seattle coffee shops people watching – that’s what they’re for!

**Head out (or east!):** Take some time off in the winter, instead of using all of your vacation time during the summer. Heading to warmer/sunnier climates can help alleviate SAD. Travel does more than give you a break from your daily routine; it can also help you escape overcast skies. Even spending a day on the other side of the Cascades can give you a lift from the dark and rain.

**Journal**: [Writing down your thoughts](http://www.everydayhealth.com/depression/living-with/things-didnt-know-about-depression/) can have a positive effect on your mood by helping you get some of your negative thoughts, feelings or concerns out of your head and onto paper. Choose some time in the evening but not too close to bedtime for this activity.

**Gratitude** practice is a good adjunct to the above. At the end of each day, think of three things you are grateful for. You can write them down or share them with a loved one in person or via email or text.

**Vitamin D:** [Low levels of vitamin D](http://www.everydayhealth.com/news/illnesses-linked-vitamin-d-deficiency/) have been linked to SAD. Research shows that people who take vitamin D supplements in winter can see significant improvement in their depression. Talk to your doctor about testing your vitamin D levels and whether [supplements](http://www.everydayhealth.com/columns/therese-borchard-sanity-break/patient-approved-natural-supplements-depression/) would be right for you.

**Laughing** with friends, watching a funny movie, or doing something that briefly improves your mood may stoke your brain’s levels of serotonin.

**Relax**: Practicing yoga or meditation can alleviate [symptoms of depression and anxiety](http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletters/Harvard_Mental_Health_Letter/2009/April/Yoga-for-anxiety-and-depression). Breathing and mindfulness exercises can actually [change neural networks](http://dailyburn.com/life/lifestyle/meditation-techniques-beginners/) and [decrease stress](http://journal.frontiersin.org/Journal/10.3389/fnhum.2013.00012/full). You can also try progressive relaxation, a technique that promotes body awareness by tensing and relaxing muscle groups throughout the body.

**Aromatherapy** may help some people with SAD. Essential oils can influence the area of the brain responsible for controlling moods and the body's internal clock that influences sleep and appetite.

You can add a few drops of essential oils to your bath at night to help you relax.

**Watch** for signs that SAD is getting worse: If you suffer from severe winter depression, consult a psychologist or psychiatrist. A qualified health care provider can help determine if your symptoms are related to SAD or may have another cause. Additional treatments available include psychotherapy, behavioral therapy, stress management techniques and antidepressants.

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