

Health: Light Therapy

By Sally James



A little light makes a big difference for Amy Voros
(Photo by Hayley Young)

If you haven't noticed, it's dark out there—which for some, means SAD times are settling in. Sally James searches for solutions to this disorder of the light deprived.

Thanks to our northern latitude, Seattle's winter-daylight window is brutally brief (just over eight hours on our shortest day), and that throws some people into a depression known as seasonal affective disorder (SAD). If you've ever experienced the fuzzy, out-of-it feeling of jet lag (when your body still thinks it is in Tokyo, even though you've returned to Seattle), you have a

sense of what SAD sufferers struggle with all winter long. Psychiatrists may prescribe psychotherapy, antidepressant medications and/or light therapy for this condition.

One of the pioneers of this field, psychiatrist Norman Rosenthal, M.D., of Georgetown University, estimates that SAD strikes 6 percent of the population in northern latitudes, which adds up to about 162,000 people in just King County.

That's no surprise to Amy Voros, 32, a Seattle life coach who has been treating her own winter blues for more than five years with two weapons: an alarm clock that wakes her with light—known as a dawn simulator—and a light box she sits in front of faithfully each morning.

Before Voros was diagnosed with SAD in 2003, she remembers feeling extremely lethargic and edgy every fall and winter. "Light therapy has been a great success for me. I love the sunshine, but I didn't realize how much light affected me until I started using a light box....It really can turn my day around and make me energized," she says.

Light is a powerful tool used in setting what scientists call the body clock—the day/night cycle also called the circadian rhythm. Light hitting the eyes sends messages to a specific part of the brain, which further influence other body systems, such as the release of hormones. One of these is melatonin, which plays a role in body temperature and drowsiness.

Seattle scientist and ophthalmologist Russell Van Gelder, M.D., head of the ophthalmology department at the University of Washington Medical Center, has been creating what he calls the light equivalent of a Seattle winter for lab mice. These mice show the same listlessness that many humans experience. He is investigating special cells that sense light in the back of the eye and hopes his research could one day lead to new ways to treat SAD.

The retinal ganglion cells he's investigating are part of the signaling system between the eye and the brain. But unlike nearby cells that send messages to the "visual" part of the brain, these cells send direct messages to a brain region known for maintaining the body clock. Knowledge of how these cells function could one day lead to a drug that might treat seasonal affective disorder, or might boost human alertness and help prevent sleep problems from shift work. "It's very exciting," Van Gelder says, while cautioning that it could take years for patients to see new treatments.

One person who is especially excited about this research is David Avery, M.D., head of inpatient psychiatry at Harborview. Avery, a well-known researcher of SAD who helped discover the value of dawn simulation, hopes that Van Gelder's mice will yield deeper understanding of the basic biology of light resetting the human clock. Especially since recent research links sleep disturbances, which can come from disruption of the body clock, to obesity and bulimia, among other disorders.

Even for those who don't think they have a serious issue with light, Avery recommends a kind of menu of light for our short winter days: Get outdoors and soak up the light, even on a cloudy day; and practice what he calls "good sleep hygiene," which means keeping to a rather rigid schedule of rising at nearly the same time every day, even on weekends.

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“Our bodies evolved to pay close attention to the dawn,” he explains. He says the body’s sensitivity to the blue-green colors of light sets in motion a kind of a “circadian symphony in the brain and body.” His best advice is to keep that music playing at a steady pace.

Winter Blues

Symptoms and Relief

These symptoms can be signs of seasonal affective disorder. A true diagnosis depends on many more variables and how much each interferes with daily life.

- > Low mood, low energy
- > Increased tendency to sleep, difficulty awakening in the morning
- > Increased appetite, weight gain
- > Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, guilt

Steps for relief

- > Use light boxes that simulate sunlight; a brightness of 10,000 lux is recommended, and a dawn simulator that creates an artificial dawn (among the many sources for these is the [Indoor Sun Shoppe](#), 160 N Canal St.; 206.634.3727).
- > Be outdoors soon after waking, so the brain registers regular light-dark cycles.
- > Go to bed and wake up at about the same time each day (including weekends).
- > Get exposure to a regular light-dark cycle.
- > Exercise regularly.

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