

MailOnline *rah Stacey*

Beams of hope for winter blues sufferers

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At least one person in 50 in the UK suffers from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), or winter depression, which starts as the days grow shorter and less light reaches our brains.

Many more – eight in ten, according to NHS Direct – suffer from the less serious version, known as winter blues, or sub-syndromal SAD.

SAD can be diagnosed if the condition has a seasonal pattern and recurs for three or more consecutive winters.

For most, the situation resolves as spring arrives but until then it can seriously impact your life.

According to the Seasonal Affective Disorder Association, sufferers of SAD will experience some of the following symptoms; winter blues sufferers are likely to have them less intensely:

- Sleep problems: oversleeping, difficulty staying awake, sleep disturbance and/or very early waking
- Lethargy and fatigue
- Craving for carbohydrates and sweet foods, often leading to weight gain
- Anxiety and inability to cope with stress
- Loss of libido
- Irritability and being antisocial; mood swings.

The causes of SAD are not fully understood, but reduced exposure to light seems to be the prime initiator, affecting the sleep-wake cycle through an increase in the hormone melatonin, and altering mood by lowering serotonin levels.

Researchers at the American National Institute of Mental Health have shown that light therapy – 30 minutes of daily exposure to a bright-light device giving out 10,000 lux – can reverse the symptoms of SAD within two weeks.

Josephine Fairley, my co-author of *The Beauty Bible* series, and I both suffered from some degree of SAD when we lived in London, and benefited from using light boxes. Now that we both live in the country, we find the problem is greatly reduced.

Jo believes it's partly down to getting outside every day and also because we're not surrounded by tall buildings blocking vast tracts of light.

In London, 30 minutes spent by a light box before I went to work boosted my mood. Jo, meanwhile, swears by her Litebook Elite, a gizmo 'smaller than a frisbee' that sits to the side of her computer.

People who find it difficult to organise the recommended 30 to 60 minutes in front of a light box might like to try a Dawn Simulator, which simulates a natural sunrise.

As psychiatrist Dr David Servan-Schreiber says, this is 'the signal to which your emotional brain has been wired to awaken during millions of years of evolution.'

- Litebook Elite, £149.99, the Healthy House, tel: 0845 450 5950; healthyhouse.co.uk. Dawn Simulator, from £49.95, Lumie, tel: 01954 780500; lumie.com

GUILT-FREE SWEET TREATS

These delicious chocolate sweetmeats, devised by nutritionist Yinka Thomas (nonipsnotucks.com), are guaranteed to enhance your mood – whatever the weather brings. And the best thing is they're good for you, too! Raw or very dark chocolate is high in magnesium and antioxidants.

MAKES 10 CHOCOLATE 'RUFFLES' (more if you make smaller ones)

- 100g raw (or at least 70 per cent cocoa solids) dark chocolate
 - 1 tbsp Oatly cream (or 1 level dsp virgin coconut oil)
 - 2 level tbsp xylitol (eg, Perfect Sweet)
 - 2 level tbsp organic cocoa powder
- 3 heaped tbsp Mornflake Toasted Crunchy Oatbran, crushed
 - 2 level tbsp ground almonds

METHOD

1. Melt the chocolate and Oatly cream in a bowl over a pan of simmering water.
2. Remove the mixture from the heat and stir in 1 tbsp xylitol with a wooden spoon. Add 1 tbsp cocoa, the Oatbran and ground almonds. Refrigerate for about an hour.
3. Remove from fridge, stir with a wooden spoon: if it's still too soft to form into balls, chill for another 10 minutes.
4. Mix the remaining xylitol and cocoa in a dish. Use a teaspoon to mould the mixture into balls and roll in the cocoa mix.
5. Refrigerate, but remove 20 minutes before eating.

Comfort eating for babies

Mummy colleagues loved the super-stylish Thrupenny Bits breast-feeding cushion from Baby BuBu, filled with hypoallergenic buckwheat husks.

Tie it around your waist and sit down so the weight of the baby rests on your lap – thus avoiding backache.

The covers (blue floral, chic black and white, or pink pattern) are stylish and it's portable, too. £60, from babybbu.co.uk

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