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Solutions For Seniors Who Suffer Wintertime Blues

THE SAVVY
SENIOR

Dear Savvy Senior,

What types of solutions can help seniors who get the winter blues? My husband has always hated winter, but since he retired, the winter months make him very depressed and lethargic. What can you tell us?

Fighting the Blues

Dear Fighting:

If your husband gets depressed in the winter but feels much better in spring and summer, he may have “seasonal affective disorder” (SAD), a wintertime depression that affects more than 36 million Americans.

Feeling SAD?

While experts aren’t exactly sure what causes SAD, most think it’s attributed to reduced daylight. Less daylight in the winter months can upset sleep-wake cycles and other circadian rhythms. And it may cause problems with a brain chemical called serotonin that affects mood.

If you think your husband may have SAD, a trip to his doctor’s office is the best way to diagnose it, or he can take a SAD self-diagnostic test at the Center for Environmental Therapeutics Web site at www.cet.org. In the meantime, here are the different treatments and remedies that can help.

Light Therapy: The most effective treatment for SAD is sitting in front of a specialized light therapy box for 15 to 20 minutes a day. Light therapy mimics outdoor light causing a change in brain chemicals linked to mood. It’s most effective when timed to fit a person’s individual circadian rhythm, body clock, which varies widely from person to person depending on whether they’re a night owl or a morning lark. Your husband can calculate his proper time for doing light therapy by taking the circadian rhythm test at www.cet.org.

The best light boxes provide 10,000 lux of illumination, many times stronger than typical indoor light, and have a diffuser screen that filters out ultraviolet rays and projects downward toward the eyes. Prices range from \$150 to \$200. You can find a variety of light therapy boxes at www.day-lights.com, 1-800-387- 0896; www.lighttherapy.philips.com, 1-866- 832-4361; www.verilux.com, 1-800-454-4408, and www.lighttherapyproducts.com, 1-800- 486-6723.

Dawn Simulation: This is a new form of light therapy that gradually turns the light on in your bedroom, creating a slow transition from darkness to dawn in the room while it's still dark outside. Studies have found that dawn simulation can ease depression and help people wake up with more energy. These products typically cost between \$100 and \$200 and are sold through many of the previously listed sites that sell light-therapy boxes.

Antidepressants: If light therapy doesn't alleviate your husband's SAD symptoms, antidepressants might help. Talk to his doctor about them.

Negative Ion Therapy: Negative ion generators help freshen and purify the air, and, according to Columbia University, help relieve depression and SAD. Several models of ion generators are on the market. Some, designed to be used for 30 to 60 minutes daily, include a wrist strap that channels the ions directly to the body to be absorbed through the skin. Other models work overnight, filling the entire room with negative ions. Web sites such as www.cet.org and www.negativeiongenerators.com, 1-866-466-4937 sell them for between \$125 and \$165.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: Even though SAD is considered to be a biological problem, identifying and changing thoughts and behavior can help alleviate symptoms too. To find a therapist who specializes in cognitive behavioral therapy, check with the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies, www.abct.org, or the Academy of Cognitive Therapy, www.academyofct.org, both offer directories on their Web sites.

Vitamin D: The sunshine vitamin, D, that we get when the sun's rays hit our skin declines over the winter months. Vitamin D deficiencies have been linked to a wide variety of illnesses, including depression. While some foods contain vitamin D, fatty fish, cod liver oil and fortified products like breakfast cereals, milk and orange juices, the most efficient way to get it is with supplements. Some experts recommend at least 4,000 IUs of vitamin D-3 daily.

Exercise: Moderate exercise such as walking, riding a stationary bike, or swimming can also help alleviate SAD symptoms.