

Amanda Vincent

Dr. Combs

English 1010-19

21 April 2013

A Light in the Darkness:

Natural Treatments for Seasonal Affective Disorder

Whether a person is a health nut, an outdoor enthusiast, or just an average Joe, being outside in the sun feels great. Waking up to the sun shining through the bedroom window brings a kind of joy not felt on cloudy days. Kids seem to feel this joy the most when they go running outside to play right after the clouds have cleared from a rainstorm. Since the beginning of time, people have based much of their life around the sun and seasons. However, in the last thirty or so years people have changed to a more indoor lifestyle, thus losing touch with nature and the benefits of the sun. Bright light therapy is being researched as a way of bringing the benefits of the sun inside. It can treat conditions such as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), postpartum depression and even Parkinson's disease ("A SAD Story" 5). Further research is still being done to prove this. Nature has been providing health benefits forever, and mankind is only now beginning to realize by how much. Bright light therapy is nature's own way of healing people who suffer from SAD and researchers are learning that it is the safer way.

Many people do not know what SAD is or if it is even a real disorder. According to the American Psychiatric Association, SAD is a depressive disorder that has been recognized for over twenty years ("A SAD Story" 4). Being that SAD is a mental illness, both psychiatrists and medical doctors are trained to diagnose it. However, many of the symptoms of SAD are not usually seen in depressive disorders, but are seen in sleeping and eating disorders (Jacobsen, et al.

57). As anyone who has been to a doctor knows, one of the hardest things to do can be telling them what your symptoms are. Sometimes it is hard to put in to words exactly how you feel. However, knowing what all your symptoms are can help make sure that you properly diagnosed.

Some of the many different symptoms of SAD include things like depression, carbohydrate cravings, increased appetite, weight gain, a rise in sleep duration, a loss of energy, guilt, a loss of interest in things once found fun, feeling worthless or hopeless, and damage to social and/or occupational performance (Laskoski 8). Dealing with these symptoms for several months out of the year is hard. The worst part is the fact that a majority of people who suffer from SAD are affected during the fall and winter, when most of the big social holidays are. It is hard for family and friends to understand why the SAD sufferer is not enjoying the festivities. It can become so hard for the SAD sufferer to be around loved ones during the holidays that they will think of any excuse to get out of going rather than feel like they are on the outside looking in.

People may think “So what? That sucks for them, but I am not part of that.” What they do not realize is that there is a good chance they are a part of it, or at least someone they know is. The exact causes of SAD are still unknown: however, it is thought to be a genetic disorder as it is often seen in people who have a close relative who has an affective disorder such as Bipolar or alcohol abuse. Another strange thing that has been found is that women are four times more likely to be diagnosed with SAD (Jacobsen, et al. 57-8). As people become aware of the disorder, they start asking questions to understand more.

As someone who suffers from SAD I can spill the beans of how it feels when SAD begins to affect a person, in this case me. For the most part I am fine until Halloween, having only occasional days of depression. After that though, it almost feels like someone else has taken control of me. I think, say, and do things that are out of line with who I normally am. I can feel it

coming on, and there is nothing I can do to stop it. I am trapped in my own mind, and there is no way out. Being that it is winter, I am always cold. I feel like I am trapped in ice or better yet a cave made of ice. It is dark as a starless night, cold as the frigid waters of the arctic, and I am alone in here. It is my own personal version of hell, and I have to face it every year. While everyone else is running around shopping, visiting, and just being happy, I find joy nowhere. It gets to the point where I began to question whether it is even worth getting out of bed to face the day, and without proper medication I even become suicidal, something I would never think of during the rest of the year. SAD is a potentially devastating disorder to deal with. It disrupts lives and families. It destroys work relations. It demoralizes confidence. It can be overcome.

The common way of helping people deal with SAD is to prescribe antidepressants to manage the symptoms. The two that have had the most research done on them are fluoxetine (commonly known as Prozac) and sertraline (commonly known as Zoloft). However, the side effects from drugs can be undesirable and cause almost as many problems as they are supposed to cure. To name a few, they include things like suicidal tendencies, nausea, headache, weight gain, insomnia, nervousness, anxiety, dizziness, dry mouth, decreased libido, rash, changes in vision (Laskoski 8), and with Prozac, if taken for more than a year, a person may run the risk of a negative impact on their long-term mood and health (Norden 419). Another downside to prescriptions is that pregnant women cannot take them as they are known to cause birth defects. Because of all the potential side effects, more and more people are looking at alternative ways to deal with SAD. Most of the alternatives being researched are looking at natural holistic ways to heal people.

The need to find successful and safe ways to treat SAD is great. According to a study done in the late 1990s around 35 million people in the United States are affected by SAD and its

milder counterpart Subsyndromal Seasonal Affective Disorder. Both forms of SAD are thought to be caused by light deprivation which is in part caused because people spend so much time under artificial light (Brainard 476). This light deprivation cause coincides with the fact that as a whole people are spending less time outside, as SAD has been known of for twenty years and people have been indoors more for the last thirty years.

There are various treatments for SAD being researched, ranging from things like getting more exercise, to herbal remedies, to bright light therapy. Exercising not only benefits one's health by getting and staying in shape, it can raise the level of serotonin one creates, this being a major defense against depression (Norden 419). The herb St. Johns Wort is used in the United Kingdom as it is known to work as an antidepressant (Linde, Berner, and Kriston). However, as the Food and Drug Administration does not, at this time, regulate herbs, this is not a method used in the US. A treatment that is gaining more publicity in the US is bright light therapy.

Bright light therapy has been looked at as a way to cure the symptoms of SAD almost since it was first diagnosed twenty years ago. Unfortunately, many of the earlier studies may be flawed for one reason or another ("A SAD Story" 4). The reason this is so unfortunate is because it means more time and money must be spent re-researching, and funding is hard to come by for any medical research. Another reason is as of 2005 SAD accounted for about 10% of all cases of major depression ("Light Therapy" 6), which means there are many people out there who need help, and antidepressants do not work for or can be used by everyone.

As with all illnesses, disorders, and diseases, there is no one magic cure that works for everyone who has ever used it. Light therapy is the same way. Dr. Norman E. Rosenthal informs us that "60 to 80 percent of SAD sufferers benefit from light therapy" (8). On the flip side, we learn that occasionally people with bipolar disorder develop mania as a result of light therapy.

Also people with photosensitive skin or a retinal condition are poor candidates for light therapy ("Light Therapy" 7). Why are they poor candidates? Because of how light therapy works. It goes back to the sun.

The preferred treatment method for light therapy is to spend time outside in the sun every day, not just walking to the office from the car. Something as simple as a ten minute walk around the block can satisfy the daily requirements of sunlight. However, this is not always possible due to the busy lives we lead. The alternative method is to use a light therapy box. The reason that people need a special box or lamp to use for light therapy is because indoor light ranges from 100 to 800 lux (10 lux equals light from one candle), as opposed to the 2,500 lux minimum a body needs to stop producing melatonin. Melatonin is a natural hormone that is produced to help make us sleepy at night (Brainard 476). When we do not get the light our bodies need to turn off melatonin production, we often stay in a groggy, somewhat dazed state of mind that can lead to depression.

According to Michael Norden, being exposed to bright light has been shown to raise the level of serotonin one creates (418). This means that bright light therapy switches off melatonin and switches on serotonin. The best part about light therapy is the rather limited side effects with the most common ones being jitteriness and headache, which is much better than the numerous side effects that antidepressants can have. Another bonus is that light therapy can bring a decline in depression symptoms within one week compared to the up to six weeks that antidepressants need (Laskoski 8). Because light therapy has fewer side effects and results can be seen more quickly, light therapy needs to become a first line defense in the fight against SAD.

Currently because of the culture of drugs in the US, all too often if someone complains to a doctor that they feel ill, they are given a shot or pills. If we go to a doctor complaining about

being depressed all the time, out comes the prescription pad. This is in part because of how we have been raised. We have been trained over the years to believe that we cannot get better without a pill. Many things, like the common cold, do not need pills. However, pills can be beneficial depending on what they are being used for. Yet researchers are finding that in some cases nature has already provided the cure.

Well before doctors, researchers, and medication, the sun has been there. She has kept the “blues” away since the dawn of time, and she continues to provide health benefits to anyone who spends time in the sunlight. Nature is there for us, just waiting for someone to find the key to healing. Bright light therapy is the way to bring the benefits of the sun indoors, and it is a safe way to help people who suffer from SAD to overcome it.

Works Cited

- Brainard, George. "All About Light Therapy" *World's Greatest Treasury of Health Secrets* (1999): 476-77. Print.
- Jacobsen, Frederick M, et al. "Seasonal Affective Disorder: A Review of the Syndrome and Its Public Health Implications." *American Journal of Public Health* 77.1 (1987): 57-60. *Public Affairs Index*. Web. 4 March 2013.
- Laskoski, Janine. "Is Bright Light Therapy Effective for Improving Depressive Symptoms in Adults with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)?" *Internet Journal of Academic Physician Assistants* 7.2 (2010): 8. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 2 March 2013.
- Linde, K, MM Berner, and L Kriston. "St John's Wort for Depression." *nhs.uk Cochrane Database of Systematic*. 2008 October; 4: n.pag. Web. 21 April 2013
- "Light Therapy for Winter Depression." *Harvard Women's Health Watch* 12.6 (2005): 6-7. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 2 March 2013.
- Norden, Michael J. "Treat Stress and Depression the Natural Way" *World's Greatest Treasury of Health Secrets* (1999): 418-19. Print.
- Rosenthal, Norman E. Interview by Steven D. Targum. "Seasonal Affective Disorder." *ncbi.nlm.nih.gov Psychiatry* (Edgmont). 2008 May; 5(5): 31-33. Web. 8 March 2013
- "A SAD Story: Seasonal Affective Disorder." *Harvard Health Letter* 33.3 (2008): 4-5. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 2 March 2013.