

## Getting Enough Light

Humans evolved to live in the outdoors. Our bodies are designed to take advantage of aspects of the natural environment in regulating internal processes. One such aspect is the light-dark cycle, which we use to regulate our circadian rhythms, including the sleep-wake cycle and certain patterns of hormone release.

One hormone, melatonin, is released by the pineal gland in the brain. When you are exposed to light, melatonin release declines; in darkness it increases. Melatonin helps you to fall asleep, and influences your alertness and ability to concentrate.

When you are away from a clearly defined cycle of darkness and bright daylight, your 24-hour rhythms begin to degrade. During the day you may feel drowsy, lack energy, and have difficulty concentrating. At night you may find it difficult to sleep. Modern life keeps most of us indoors most of the time – away from natural light-dark cycles.

Some people experience a seasonal pattern of depression. Typically they get most depressed during the months of lowest light (November to January in the northern hemisphere) and brighten with the return of the sun. Such problems appear to be more pronounced at northern latitudes, where the reduction of light is more extreme, and in cloudy climates where the sun's light is dimmed even during the day.

Even people with non-seasonal depression, however, appear to be affected by low exposure to light. One reason may be that depression often triggers an aversion to bright light, so people spend a lot of time in dimly-lit rooms.

Regardless of the form your depression takes, it may be helpful to maximize your exposure to light during the hours of daylight, and to restrict it for the hour or two before you hope to get to sleep.

### Tips for managing your light exposure

Put a check mark beside any of the tips below that might be useful for you to try out.

- \_\_\_\_\_ If you work in an office with a window, point your desk at the window, not at the door. That way you will get strong light exposure while you work.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Open your curtains during the day. If you have blinds, raise them completely rather than just tilting them open.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Get some bright light exposure as soon as possible after getting up. Take an early morning walk or schedule your outdoor errands for the morning.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Examine your sunglasses. Extremely dark sunglasses can filter out so much sunlight that you are, in effect, in a darkened room even at noon on a sunny day. Some people have eye conditions requiring very dark glasses; most do not. Try to get by with sunglasses that don't filter out so much of the light.
- \_\_\_\_\_ During winter in northern latitudes the sun may rise after you head to work and set before you go home. Ensure that you get enough light by scheduling time to be outside during the brightest hours. Perhaps you could extend your work hours, and then exercise or run errands on a longer lunch break.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Avoid bright light for at least an hour before going to bed. If your schedule demands that you go to bed before sundown, or if you live where the sun goes down very late in summer, get indoors and draw the curtains an hour beforehand.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Don't be too concerned about the light from incandescent bulbs, computer monitors, or televisions. This isn't bright enough to suppress melatonin release to any significant degree.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Consider replacing your household fluorescent lights with high-intensity full-spectrum tubes to simulate daylight. Turn these off, though, long before you head to bed.

Is a lack of exposure to bright light a possible factor in your depression? If so, which of the tips above seems like a good first step?

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### **What about light therapy?**

In addition to the low-tech recommendations above, you can get special high-intensity light therapy units to help your mood and set your 24-hour cycle. For the most part, these units look like fluorescent tube fixtures on angled stands. You sit in front of this unit at a distance of 12 to 24 inches for a period of 20 to 40 minutes when you first get up in the morning. Some people eat their breakfast or read the paper in front of their unit.

Research supports the use of light therapy for people with a wide spectrum of disorders. Those with seasonal affective disorder are the most likely to be helped, though positive effects have also been found for regular major depression.

Light therapy boxes are available through most medical supply houses, and generally cost \$150 to \$300. Other versions of light treatment are also available (including light visor hats and dawn simulators). The majority of the research has been conducted using large light boxes, however, and these have achieved the strongest support to date.

If you think you would like to try light therapy, consider the following:

- Consult your physician or ophthalmologist to see whether you have any eye conditions that might be aggravated by high-intensity light therapy.
- See if you can rent a unit for a month before you buy one. If light therapy is going to work for you, the effects should be noticeable within a week to ten days of starting regular use.
- Use the unit early in the morning when you first get up (or, if you work shifts, whenever you first get up). Avoid using it within five or six hours of your planned bed-time.
- If you have bipolar disorder, consult your physician before using light therapy. There have been some indications that high-intensity light exposure can worsen a manic upswing.
- Start keeping a daily mood diary (such as the one in the Introduction) a week before you start light therapy, then keep going for four to six weeks. This will help you to see whether the light therapy is having an effect.

Does light therapy seem like a good option for you to try, given what you know of your depression? If so, what are the first few steps of a plan to try it out?

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