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 Writer & Photographer

Lighten Up



Waning sunlight in winter can lead to mild or severe depression. To help alleviate it, make sure your work and living spaces are well lit, preferably with natural light and full-spectrum light bulbs.

If winter's dark days get you down, a few minor changes in your home can help brighten your mood.

By Ruthanne Johnson

Dark days get you down? If all you want to do is sleep in and curl up on the couch at night, you're not alone.

With winter's colder temperatures and shorter days, it's normal to feel less energetic and want more snuggling time. For some people, however, the winter blues can turn into a clinical-type depression that lasts from fall until spring. Known as Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, the ailment typically causes anxiety, low energy, social withdrawal, sleepiness, increased appetite and weight gain.

"It's probably a variety of the hibernation response," explains Dr. Joel Shapiro, a psychiatrist at the Boulder Mental Health Center. "The body naturally recognizes a decrease in the amount of daylight, so the farther north someone lives, the more likely they are to be affected by the seasons."

SAD affects about 10 percent of the population, with women more susceptible



than men, Shapiro says. The disorder is thought to stem from an interruption in the body's circadian rhythm, caused by decreased sunlight during fall and winter. When darkness descends, we begin to secrete melatonin, the body's master sleep hormone. SAD sufferers tend to produce melatonin longer into the early morning hours than other people, making it more difficult for them to rise and shine.

Forcing the body to follow early-morning work and workout schedules compounds the problem, and depression can ensue.

To mitigate SAD, Shapiro and other physicians recommend light therapy. This involves exposing oneself to bright, full-spectrum light panels in the early morning and late afternoon to simulate sunlight exposure. He also advises getting outside quality time outdoors each day. "There's some evidence that people who spend all day in the office away from daylight are more likely to get SAD," Shapiro says. Adjunct treatments can include cognitive therapy and antidepressants.

Quick Fixes

While Coloradans have a distinct advantage over folks in severely daylight-challenged places like Alaska, everyone's vitality seems to dip when the sun tracks lower in the sky. But you can brighten your mood—and your home—with a few simple changes, whether you suffer from SAD or just normal winter blues.

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One of the easiest changes is to paint your most trafficked rooms in colors with high reflective ratings. “Paint colors can act as a stimulus, and impact mood and well-being,” says interior designer Cher Schuck of CS Design in Superior, who cites Benjamin Moore’s opalescence paint as an example. Reflective and translucent paints help maximize available light, and colors with lighter values, like yellow, are more reflective than those with darker values, like purple.

Another low-budget way to a brighter home is to use lighter monochromatic palettes, like cream, latte and white, Schuck says. Glass tables and vases also help reflect light. Other ways to brighten up, she says, are to replace glaring overhead lights with artful

free-standing fixtures; install mirrors opposite windows to capture and reflect light; replace solid cabinetry and doors with white frosted or decorative laminated glass; hang curtains on longer rods so they frame rather than block windows; and retrofit with more reflective materials, like metal and glass.

Full-spectrum light bulbs are another economical way to brighten a home. Full-spectrum lights mimic the color and intensity of natural sunlight. Bulbs marked 5,000° Kelvin and 90 CRI (Color Rendering Index) or higher are most similar to summer sunlight at noon. “[Full-spectrum bulbs] tend to be more pure-white light than the yellow cast of incandescent, or the typical green or bluish cast of fluorescent lamps, and the improvements [on mood] can be startling,” says **Larry Parrish of Parrish Construction in Boulder.**

Paul Williams of Aspen Peak Custom Construction in Boulder also recommends adding lights above cabinets and shelving,

under-lights beneath cabinets, and “for a moderate cost, faux backlit windows.”

If you can afford structural changes, Schuck says that downsizing or removing non-load-bearing walls creates fewer confined spaces and a more consistent light level, and allows more light to bounce off surfaces. A coffer or curved ceiling adds volume, and enlarging existing doors and upgrading to French doors, bay windows or floor-to-ceiling windows adds light.

Parrish suggests adding skylights or windows on the south side of your house. “Many older homes lack enough windows...and adding new windows is relatively easy,” he says. Besides making a home brighter and more cheerful, southern windows can improve passive-solar heating and make your home more energy efficient. However, he recommends planting deciduous trees close by or installing a properly designed roof overhang or awning to shade southern windows and skylights from the intense summer sun, which can cause a home to overheat.

So when the winter blues set in, there’s no need to fret. Just let in the light.

To combat winter blues, experts recommend minimal window treatments, monochromatic color schemes, indirect lighting and reflective interior paint. If painting or remodeling isn’t an option, you can still boost your mood with these simple steps:

Get moving

Exercise naturally boosts happy hormones, known as endorphins.

Eat a tuna sandwich

Oily fish like tuna and salmon have lots of mood-regulating omega-3 fatty acids.

Take your vitamins

Nutritional supplements like vitamin D, 5-HTP and St. John’s Wort can keep serotonin levels high and help fight off depression.

Go on a holiday

Cash in your two weeks vacation and travel to a warm, sunny place in winter.

Go sunny-side up

Egg yolks from free-range chickens are a great source of vitamin D, which your skin naturally makes when exposed to ultraviolet light.

Go nuts

Magnesium in almonds boosts serotonin, and selenium in Brazil nuts acts as an antidepressant.

B good

Get plenty of B vitamins seasoning your food with nutritional yeast or introducing liver into your recipes.

—Source: Vitamin Cottage

Natural Grocers

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