The Expert Says-Winter 2012

People living with seasonal affective disorder (SAD) can take steps to help themselves, says psychologist Elizabeth Waterman, PsyD.

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What are some at-home treatment tips for people with SAD?

Studies show improvement in SAD symptoms for some people who walk outside for at least one hour each day. Outdoor light, especially sunlight before noon, is often brighter than the light boxes [used for SAD therapy]. This is helpful even when the sky is overcast. In addition, exercise may be helpful, particularly when done outdoors. And eating a balanced diet may elevate mood and diminish the craving for sweets. Also, plan for seasonal energy fluctuations and work that into your plans.

Does SAD need intermittent treatment?

When patients undergo light therapy, the treatment typically starts when fall arrives and daylight hours decrease. Cognitive behavioral therapy [CBT] may or may not be used intermittently depending on how well the client has learned and practiced the CBT techniques. Sometimes people who master CBT skills take “booster sessions” to refresh their skills before fall arrives. In addition, antidepressants [are] another treatment approach.

Does light therapy work for everyone?

Studies show inconsistent findings in terms of the effectiveness of SAD light therapy. But this type of therapy does seem to work for some.

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