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Daylight-saving time is no time to celebrate

By Lisa Farino

Special to The Seattle Times

Given Seattle's bad rap for dark days, you'd think that everyone would enthusiastically welcome the early start of daylight-saving time. But for those suffering from seasonal affective disorder, the time change is a cruel hoax: Yes, the sun sets an hour later tonight, but it also rose an hour later this morning. And as recent research has discovered, it might be the morning darkness that feeds the winter blues.

"I find it very difficult to rise before daylight; my body tends to rise naturally about an hour after sunrise," says Maureen Finn, who lives in Carnation and works as a project assistant for an engineering firm in downtown Bellevue.

While Finn, 47, doesn't suffer from full-blown SAD, a form of light-related clinical depression, her changes in mood and energy in the winter are typical of the winter blues experienced by many in northern latitudes. "In the wintertime, I have less energy and motivation," she says. "I just want to go home and cocoon in my fuzzy slippers."

Research published in the journal *Current Biology* in October suggests there's a biological reason for precisely this combination of experiences — difficulty rising before sunrise and feeling less energetic in the wintertime.

"People who suffer from seasonal mood and energy problems have a phase delay in their circadian rhythms," says Dr. David Avery, director of inpatient psychiatry at Harborview Medical Center and an associate professor at University of Washington School of Medicine.

"Such people rely on the morning light to assist with waking up and to synchronize their circadian rhythms. We now know that the lack of morning light that's typical in the wintertime is the main cause of winter depression."



Kristopher Lee / The Seattle Times



GREG GILBERT

Dawn-Marie Oliver, of Duvall, sits at her kitchen table with two bright lights facing her while she reads the paper. Oliver, who has seasonal affective disorder, hopes the artificial early-morning light will compensate for the oncoming dark mornings brought on by daylight-saving time.

How to cope with dark mornings

Try rising with the sun for the rest of March. By the first Sunday in April, sunrise in Seattle will occur at 6:37 a.m., and you'll once again be synced up with the world around you.

If you have a light box, use it as soon as you get up for 20 to 30 minutes. This light exposure is not nearly as effective if used later in the morning.

Walk outside in the morning instead of using a light box. Even if it's cloudy, you'll still be getting enough light to reset your circadian rhythms. The walk is most effective as soon as you get out of bed.

You've got the rhythms in you

Circadian rhythms originate in the hypothalamus, which serves as a sort of master clock for fluctuations in many daily body cycles, including body temperature and hormone levels, two factors that strongly influence sleeping and waking. For some people, that internal master clock runs at roughly 24 hours. For others it tends to run late and requires bright light to reset it every morning.

Many researchers now believe that those whose bodies are more dependent on early-morning bright light are more likely to suffer from SAD. While this theory is disputed — some experts say the disorder is caused by shorter days, and not necessarily by morning darkness — it was bolstered by last year's study in *Current Biology*, which found that the annual move to daylight-saving time disrupted circadian rhythms, especially among those whose biological clocks tend to run late.

(Dr. Avery estimates that about 10 percent of SAD sufferers' biological clocks run early, causing them to wake up in the middle of the night. The treatment for them is bright-light therapy in the evening.)

The trick of time

The latest understanding of seasonal depression may help explain why many people with SAD and the winter blues were frustrated by last year's move of daylight-saving time from April to March, a change aimed at reducing energy consumption. After all, the move shifts sunrise on the second Sunday in March from 6:33 a.m. to 7:33 a.m., depriving many of much-needed bright light upon waking.

"For those with winter depression, moving the clocks ahead in March could cause a setback in the natural remission of symptoms that typically starts around this time," says Dr. Alfred Lewy, a professor of biological psychiatry at Oregon Health & Science University. "This temporary stalling or setback could last for a few weeks."

Dr. Carla Hellekson, a psychiatrist in Bellevue, has seen firsthand how the moods of her SAD patients start to lift once the sun begins to rise earlier. In late February, one of her patients told her she was thrilled that the sun was now rising before 7 a.m., but she was dreading the move to

Trick your body with a dawn simulator, a bedside lamp that mimics the gradual brightening that happens at sunrise.

Source: Dr. Alfred Lewy, Oregon Health & Science University

— Lisa Farino

Information

Do you need professional help for your winter blues? Take a diagnostic test at The Center for Environmental Therapeutics, www.cet.org.

daylight-saving time in March. "She said it was like being given a gift, but then being told you cannot enjoy it for another few weeks."

Working around the clock

Of course, the problem isn't with daylight saving, per se. It's that the workaday world of jobs, school and child care requires us to show up at certain times regardless of how early or late the sun comes up. One small pilot study by Lewy found that people with SAD experience symptomatic relief quite quickly when they are allowed to adjust their waking and sleeping times to the sun rather than to an externally imposed schedule.

Lewy didn't continue the study because it didn't seem like a practical solution for most people.

Still, a more flexible work schedule could be a blessing for people who struggle with waking up in the dark. Dawn-Marie Oliver, 39, knows that she's much happier, healthier and productive when her workplace allows her to adapt her work schedule to her sleep schedule.

Oliver suffers from a mild case of SAD. "In the wintertime, I'm sluggish and more irritable," she says. "If I don't use a light box, I will have mild to moderate symptoms of depression. But when I use my light box, I don't have these problems nearly as much."

Not surprisingly, Oliver is a "night owl" who functions best if she can go to bed at midnight and wake up at 9 a.m.

In her current job as a technical-writing contractor at Microsoft, she's thankful that she doesn't need to be in the office until 10:30 a.m. Nonetheless, she dreaded the clocks moving forward. "Either I'll spend weeks coming in closer to 11:30 a.m.," says Oliver, who lives in Duvall, "or I'll have to force myself to get up before my body is ready, which will eventually make me sick."

Yay for the light!

Not everyone is unhappy with the extension of daylight-saving time.

Lynn Gottlieb is an outdoor lover who brings her dogs to Magnuson Park every weeknight after work. "I was thrilled

last year when daylight-saving time was moved to March. I'd rather have daylight later in the evening," she says. "When it's light in the evening, it's more pleasant to walk around in my neighborhood after work, and it encourages my neighbors to go outside and talk to one another."

Though she must wake up around 5:30 a.m. to catch a van pool from Seattle to the Eastside, Gottlieb isn't bothered by the lingering early morning darkness. "I'm not a morning person, but whether it's light or dark in the morning really doesn't make any difference to me."

Unfortunately, having to wake up in the dark does matter for Finn, the project assistant. "I tend to rise naturally when I can rise with the sun, so it's really stressful when it's dark in the morning. I often arrive at work late because I can't wake up any earlier," she says. "And besides, I don't buy this argument about saving energy by moving daylight-saving time [into March]. It just doesn't make any sense. We're using energy when we're awake no matter what."

Lisa Farino is a Seattle-based freelance health and science writer.

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