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## Bright light beats the blahs

Yes, it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. But if darker, shorter days dampen your mood, sap your energy, send you on eating binges or plunge you into a full-fledged depression, a candle won't be enough.

Bright light — and lots of it — is a better prescription, say experts in the link between light and mental health.

"It's been known for a long time that darkness makes us sad and bright light makes us happy," says Daniel Kripke, a professor emeritus of psychiatry at the University of California-San Diego. "Now it's been shown scientifically."

In the 1980s, scientists established that some people become depressed each year in late fall or winter and then improve in the springtime.

It's now thought that about 5% of people in the USA have so-called seasonal affective disorder (SAD), says Michael Terman, director of the Center for Light Treatment and Biological Rhythms at Columbia University Medical Center in New York. An additional 10% to 15% have milder versions of the symptoms, including low mood, low energy, oversleeping and overeating, he says.

Terman believes there is yet another group with what he calls SANS: seasonal atypical neurovegetative syndrome.

"These people suffer no depression whatsoever," he says, but they have all the other symptoms, including diet-busting cravings for high-carb comfort foods (unfortunately coinciding with diet-busting holidays from Thanksgiving through Valentine's Day).

If you are among those folks, your winter blahs may already be starting, though you may get a brief respite this week thanks to the return of standard time and earlier sunrises. As sunrise gets later, though, and days get shorter, watch out: Your darkest days could be just around the corner.

Here's how to lighten them up:

- **Get up and greet the sun.** A dose of early-morning sun is the most natural remedy for SAD and related problems, which, in most people, seem to be biological responses to darker mornings. A 30- to 60-minute walk or jog in morning light can help, the experts say. And sun at any time of day couldn't hurt. But there's a problem: Many people can't or don't want to be outside that much on cold winter mornings.

"A lot of people don't have that much time between when they wake up and when they need to be somewhere," says Alfred Lewy, a professor of psychiatry at Oregon Health & Science University in Portland. So the scientists have come up with an alternative:

- **Get up and greet the artificial sun.** Put an artificial light box (cost: about \$200) on your breakfast table and, studies show, you have a good chance of easing your SAD symptoms. Some people need more light time than others, experts say. And some get relief from using light later in the day. An alternative: Put a "dawn-simulating" light that gradually gets brighter next to your bed. For details, visit the Center for Environmental Therapeutics, a non-profit group headed by Terman, at [cet.org](http://cet.org).

- **Light up your life.** Turn on some extra lights in your home or office. Although there's less evidence that regular indoor lighting can improve mood, it might help. And it can be done in an environmentally correct manner, Kripke says. That's because the light spectrum produced by energy-saving compact fluorescent bulbs has more mood-lifting potential than that produced by traditional incandescent bulbs, he says. To get the possible benefit but

avoid the too-blue feeling that some bulbs produce, look for those with a Kelvin rating of 3,000 to 4,000, Terman suggests.

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