

How to stay occupied upon the arrival of the long nights of winter

Upon the arrival of winter, many people wonder about how to cope with dark skies and increased time spent indoors. Those who leave for work or school in the early morning and return in the evening may find they have little to no opportunity to see and enjoy the sun.

The transition to winter can be difficult. Certain biochemical changes take place in the body in reaction to less sunlight, and it helps to know about these changes should they prove problematic when winter hits full swing.

Many people experience seasonal affective disorder, often referred to as SAD. SAD is marked by increased sleepiness, depression, anxiety, irritability, and lack of energy. Experts think that two specific chemicals in the brain, melatonin and serotonin, may play a significant role in SAD. These two chemicals help regulate a person's sleep-wake cycles, energy and mood. The short days and long hours of darkness in fall and winter may cause increased levels of melatonin and decreased levels of serotonin, creating the biological

conditions for depression.

SAD also can inspire a craving for sugary foods or carbohydrates, which may be the body's natural way to stimulate more serotonin production or get an energy boost.

The following are some ways to feel more energized and upbeat despite the long hours of darkness.

- **Spend as many hours as you can outside.** When you wake up in the morning, open the curtains or blinds and soak up the sun's rays. This can help you get some vitamin D and will also suppress melatonin production, which could make you feel drowsy.

- **Invest in a light therapy lamp.** These lamps simulate the rays of the sun and can be particularly helpful for those who experience SAD from decreased sunlight. Follow the manufacturer's instructions to get the exposure you need. Light therapy can improve mood and decrease other SAD symptoms.

- **Continue outdoor activities.** Even when it is snowy or dark, life should still go on as

normal. Try to maintain normal recreational schedules, making time for outdoor activities. Fresh air can be revitalizing, and studies have shown that exercise can help to combat depression.

- **Spend additional time with friends or family members.** Routinely play host or hostess to friends and family. Hosting people in a social setting is good for the mind and can stave off feelings of cabin fever.

- **Host activities that take advantage of the darkness.** Kids can play a rousing game of hide-and-seek in the yard while their parents

light a fire in the hearth or in an outdoor fire pit and warm up with mugs of hot chocolate. Play games of laser tag or give children glow sticks so they can still have fun outdoors.

Darker times are ahead, but people can make it through the winter months by planning activities that do not necessarily require sunlight.



Outdoor activities do not need to end just because night is falling earlier these days.



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