

Change in Light Leads to Mood Changes

by Alyce Duckworth, LCSW

Supervisor, Prince St. Academy, Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network

October, 2007

This year, November 4th marks the day we all experience a one-hour “fall back” in time. Many of us think of the time change as a chance to get a little extra sleep (one hour can be a lot for some of us – especially you busy parents out there). But, loss of daylight hours can also lead to Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) symptoms. Many of us can relate to at least some of the symptoms associated with SAD: Increase in emotional overeating, decrease in motivation and activity levels, mild feelings of depression, loss of interest in formerly pleasurable activities, increased desire for sleep, and lower energy; are a few of them. Most people experience SAD symptoms to a very mild degree – just enough to be annoying in day-to-day life. Some people, however, experience severe mood disturbances at the change in seasons. For these people, professional mental health intervention is often necessary.

Although Coloradans have it a bit easier in the sunshine department (with over 300 sunny days a year), SAD can still become an issue for us. After all, when autumn and winter hit, most humans struggle, at least a little bit, with the overwhelming biological urge to hibernate. As we stand on the brink of losing a few more good hours of daylight, here are some things to keep in mind in an attempt to keep SAD at bay:

- Prepare yourself. Healthy eating, sleeping, and exercise habits that you develop before the time change are more likely to be perpetuated after the time change. The sooner you can start getting used to a routine that involves activity in the darker hours, the better.
- During the darker months, make use of artificial light sources. This could include local greenhouse lighting (my personal favorite is the Butterfly Pavilion), tanning bed light (with a full understanding of potential risks involved), or using a “Light Therapy” source (such as the patented *Litebook*, created specifically to treat symptoms related to SAD. While seeking increased light, keep in mind that the average human body also needs at least 8 hours of darkness per day so that the biological clock can be reset and valuable internal functions will operate more smoothly.

- Look into using supplements to help with mood changes and energy levels. Most physicians can either help in this pursuit or refer you to someone who can.
- As always, seek mental health support if necessary. If mood swings are severe and/or thoughts of suicide arise, seek professional help immediately.
- Keep up your healthy daily practices. I've said it before, but this one bears repeating. Healthy eating, sleeping, and exercise habits go a long way toward improving mood. Focusing on all of these areas can effectively combat potential effects of changes in the seasons.
- Whenever possible, plan visits or vacations in the winter months, especially if your exploits might take you to sunnier locations.
- Increase your participation in winter outdoor activities. Getting active while enjoying the outdoors is one of the best combinations for improving physical and mental health, no matter what time of year it is!
- Increase participation in indoor hobbies. Although the benefit of the outdoors and the sunlight is lacking, indoor activities keep your mind and body working together toward a better mood.

© Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network, 2008

Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network offers comprehensive behavioral health services for adults, seniors, families and children.

- | | | | |
|--|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| • Counseling – Individual, Group, Family | • Substance Abuse Treatment | • Criminal Justice Services | Information, Initial Appointment 303 730 8858 |
| • Psychiatry | • Victim Services | • Clubhouse – Vocational/Social Rehab | Emergency & Crisis Intervention 303 730 3303 |
| • Case Management | • Adult Acute Treatment Unit | • Day Treatment Therapeutic School | Pharmacy 303 797 2500 |
| • Education & Wellness Programs | • Adult Supported & Residential Housing | • School-based Services | |