

Fighting SAD—With the long dark days of winter upon us, SAD, or Seasonal Affective Disorder, is a problem many experience. Depression, with the subsequent loss of the feeling of well being, and the lethargy that go along with it, makes SAD a formidable issue to deal with. Around one in five Irish people are affected by SAD, according to a survey conducted in 2007. The survey also shows women are more likely to be affected by SAD than men.

In order to be healthy we need sunlight. The light from the sun is made up of energy from the full spectrum of wavelengths. When we see a rainbow, we see the wavelengths separated into the visible bands of light. The artificial lighting we generally use has a very narrow wave length band.

The full spectrum light that comes from the sun affects our brains in a number of subtle ways, and without it we don't function or feel at our best. Some of the more readily noticeable things are how we see colours and eyestrain as we read, do intricate work, or use a computer. We are also left feeling drained of energy after long exposures to artificial light. Have you ever been in a place with no windows for a length of time, and then stepped out into the sunlight? How did you feel as you were bathed in the natural daylight?

Depression is a problem that many suffer from, and there are a variety of reasons that this condition affects people. While it is mild in many, in some it leads to serious problems such as alcoholism and drug addiction, even to suicide as the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness drown out the desire to live. SAD is just one piece of the picture, but as mentioned above, a major one in Ireland during the winter months.

There are simple ways of fighting SAD in our lives. One way is to make it a practice to get out in the middle of the day, even if the sun is not directly shining, for at least fifteen minutes. Taking a brisk walk also adds the affect of clearing the lungs and stimulating the circulation. Full Spectrum lighting is another simple solution for our homes and work places. Modern technology enables us to produce light sources that emit a full spectrum of light, thus creating an environment that encourages a heightened sense of well being; giving the brain what it needs to do its job well. Since our emotional state and sense of well being have to do with chemical balance and interaction in our brain, this is a big plus. Make sure the light source is truly 'Full Spectrum' with a correlated colour temperature of at least 5000 Kelvin or higher, a colour rendering index of 90 or higher, a spectral power distribution that includes all parts of the visible spectrum (380 - 780 nm); and they should not emit the harmful ultraviolet wavelengths that we wear sun block to protect ourselves from. There is at least one retailer in Waterford who stocks four and five foot full spectrum florescent tubes (Kavanagh's) and it is possible to get full spectrum bulbs that fit into normal light sockets without too much trouble (www.litech.ie). Try it in one room; you'll be surprised how much better you feel, and notice the difference when you leave the natural light environment. In a business setting, people work better when they feel better.

Another important thing to remember in fighting SAD is to find reasons to laugh. The craic is important to our mental well being, it directly affects our brain chemistry. Having a healthy good time with our family and friends is not only therapeutic, it's—well its fun!

Emerald Health and Education Foundation
www.emeraldhef-ie.org