A SAD Suggestion

Many folks are afflicted by seasonal affective disorder (SAD) in northern latitudes during fall and winter months. SAD is characterized by being tired, moody, unable to focus at work, depression, even despair, cravings for sweets and carbohydrates, weight gain, loss of libido, irritability, anxiety, hostility, even anger, or something like continual jet lag.

SAD seems to be associated with fewer hours of daylight. The likely proximate cause of SAD is deficiency of vitamin D, the sunshine vitamin, which is made in the skin in response to daylight, or low levels of the brain chemical serotonin, which the body also increases on exposure to bright light, or high levels of melatonin, which the body reduces on exposure to light. All sorts of other problems also result from vitamin-D deficiency.

Phototherapy or light therapy, that is exposure of skin to light, is an effective ameliorant of SAD, and so-called light boxes are available for this purpose. The idea is to expose the skin to bright light from the box for a time each day. During this time, one can be reading or some other activity that is compatible with sitting or standing still by the light. Some research suggests that light therapy may help alleviate SAD symptoms faster and better than vitamin-D supplements or antidepressant drugs such as serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs). Below are several Web references to support these presumptions.

My suggestion is to combine this light therapy with what is an everyday activity for most folks, the morning shower. Lights could be installed in the walls and ceiling of the shower. Waterproof lights are available to be used, for example, underwater in the walls of swimming pools. Or, with a glass-enclosed shower stall or a transparent or translucent shower curtain, the lights could be outside the shower positioned so as to produce bright light therein. Light-, bright-colored walls and ceiling would help.
There are some advantages of this shower scheme over a light box: A larger area of skin is exposed to the light, which means that more vitamin D is produced per unit of time spent in the light. If a daily shower is already routine, then no additional time is taken away from other activities, and there is no need to remember a separate ritual.

Still open is the question of what spectrum is needed for these lights. Imitation sunlight is known to be effective, but is it necessary? Is ultraviolet (UV) necessary or desirable? Some of the available light boxes contain ordinary incandescent or fluorescent lights, which produce hardly any UV. Such lights are probably adequate and perhaps desirable even if they require somewhat longer exposure than so-called full-spectrum lights, which emit some UV.

Following are some Web references relative to SAD.

http://www.ConsumerReports.org/static/0211vit0.html
http://www.biopsychiatry.com/dvit.htm
http://www.cnn.com/HEALTH/alternative/9907/12/sun.depression/
http://www.thebodyblues.com/study.html
http://www.nmha.org/infoctr/factsheets/27.cfm
http://www.dotpharmacy.co.uk/upsad.html
http://www.lef.org/protocols/prtcls-txt/t-prtcl98.html
http://www.lef.org/protocols/prtcl-098refs.html

There are thousands (!) of other references, some trustworthy, turned up by Google.

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