

The light-box

You might not think the right light could undo years of tiredness, weight gain and brain fog, but it did for Linda Macek—in just days!

“I was sleepwalking through life”

Beep...beep...beep! Linda groggily raised her head from the pillow and squinted at the screeching alarm clock. It was 8 A.M., and she was scheduled to meet one of her social-work clients at 9 A.M. *I'm too exhausted to care anymore*, thought Linda as sleet pinged against her bedroom window. With a groan, she swung her arm out of bed, reached toward the alarm clock and yanked its plug out of the wall.

“The truth is, I never felt my best in the winter months,” remembers Linda. “But in December 2004, things really took a turn for the worse. I felt full of despair for no reason. I tossed and turned at night, then went through my days as if I were a zombie. I couldn't stop eating, and my brain was too fried to function. It was almost like my mood and health were pinned to the weather: gray and bleak.

Barely hanging on

“I'm a single mom, and my son, Noah, was only 4 at the time. For his sake, I had to keep up appearances. So I locked down into survival mode. My mantra became: Keep Noah loved, the laundry moving and the two of us fed. Everything else was secondary. Friends and colleagues weren't sure what to make of me—I was too sad to socialize and too zonked out to carry on a coherent conversation. Clients picked up on my ‘off’ state and started trying to counsel *me*. I lost faith that I could

maintain my clinical practice, so I made the painful decision to give it up.

“It was hard to believe that just months prior, I had been working 10-hour days, biking with Noah in the park, hanging out with my friends and breezing through novels. I wondered, *Where did that person go? What on earth is the matter with me?* In an effort to heal myself, I tried exercise. I tried balancing my diet. I tried natural sleep aids like valerian. But nothing lifted my funk or fog. The doctors I saw came up with the same diagnosis: clinical depression. They gave me prescription antidepressants, but the pills only made me feel worse, so I tossed them in the trash.

Now it's go-go-go

“While researching my symptoms online, I was led to lots of websites about seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, a condition brought on by the lack of sunlight in the winter. So I met with a holistic practitioner, who confirmed that my extreme winter lethargy, poor sleep quality, inability to concentrate and weight gain were classic symptoms of SAD. With my training in mental health, it should have been obvious to me all along. But I guess when you're in it, you're blind to it.

“The doctor suggested that I purchase a high-intensity light box to compensate for winter's dark days. The owner of The SunBox Company,

cure

a light-box business located near my home, helped me pick out a model. He explained that if I sat in front of the box for just 20 minutes a day, I could reverse my symptoms completely.

"Honestly, I didn't expect the turnaround to be dramatic or quick, but let me tell you: Within four days I was sleeping through the night again, my old energy started to trickle back and I realized that I felt happy for the first time in months. In the weeks that followed, my extra winter pounds just... disappeared. I didn't know how, but I wasn't about to question it!

"In the end, my light box was completely life-changing. Now nothing slows me down—especially not the season. In fact, I'm currently in the final stages of reopening my practice, which is going to be bigger and better than ever. I've even learned Spanish so I can reach out to more clients in my community. And as for my alarm clock, it definitely isn't bothering me anymore—I bound out of bed without it!"

—as told to Hallie Potocki



Linda Macek, 50, with son Noah, 9, Mount Airy, MD

Are gray days making you tired?

Fully 9 out of 10 women will struggle with some level of seasonal affective disorder (SAD) this winter. The reason: Insufficient sunlight leads to under-stimulation of the brain's light-sensitive pineal gland, where the hormone melatonin is produced.

"Melatonin output normally rises at night and wanes in the morning—this cyclic action helps regulate the sleep-wake cycle, mental alertness and hunger control," explains Michael E. Silverman, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychiatry at the Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City. "Any malfunction in melatonin output can trigger depressive symptoms, fatigue, brain fog and cravings."

He adds that melatonin also helps maintain optimal levels of insulin and progesterone. Imbalances in these hormones can lead to weight gain, irritability, severe PMS and intense hot flashes. Luckily, there's a winter workaround: Research shows boosting melatonin levels just before bed can improve the

hormone's cycling for restful sleep and energetic days. How to do it:

SNACK ON WALNUTS

These nuts are a great natural source of melatonin. In an animal study published in the journal *Nutrition*, subjects who were fed a serving of walnuts (the human equivalent of a handful) experienced a threefold jump in blood levels of melatonin.

SIP RED WINE

The skins of red grapes contain trace amounts of melatonin, which are then concentrated during the fermentation process. The study-proven dose: one to two glasses of red wine per night.

DIM THE LIGHTS AT NIGHT

Artificial indoor light sends a "daytime" signal to the pineal gland. This can hinder the natural nighttime rise in melatonin, according to Japanese researchers. For this reason, it's best to stick with low lighting in your home after sundown—for example, by using night-lights in low-traffic hallways.

HOW A LIGHT BOX CAN HELP

If the above measures don't deliver relief within 7 to 10 days, consider a high-intensity light box. Melatonin production normalizes quickly when a person is exposed to light of at least 10,000 lux (units of illumination)—that's roughly double the intensity of midday winter sunlight, says William S. Gilmer, M.D., a psychiatrist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago. He advises women to get 20 to 45 minutes of exposure to a 10,000 lux light box right after waking each morning. This can improve symptoms in as little as three days.

Once a doctor diagnoses SAD, many insurance companies will

reimburse patients for the cost of therapeutic light boxes and lamps. Here are two top-rated models:

For a family room

Alaska Northern Lights North Star 10,000 (\$399, at AlaskaNorthernLights.com) provides 10,000 lux at a distance of up to 24 inches, the largest range among major brands.

For a desk

BlueMax HD 70w Dimmable Desk Lamp (\$169 and up, at FullSpectrumSolutions.com) provides 10,000 lux and has a flexible neck for easy adjustment.