

Frequently Asked Questions

Health Issues

How can I use lighting to help cure cabin fever?

From OSRAM SYLVANIA Web Site, 1 February 1995:

Curing cabin fever means taking a fresh look at artificial lighting, decor, diet and exercise, according to a OSRAM SYLVANIA senior scientist.

DANVERS, Mass., -- The effects of this year's arctic blasts have been particularly far-reaching -- and hard-hitting. For many Americans -- even in more temperate parts of the country -- the short, cold days of winter mean less outdoor activity, more exposure to artificial light and a concurrent case of "cabin fever", or winter blues.

Restless, lethargic, cranky, moody, "down in the dumps" -- these are the words used to describe this winter malaise. But, according to Dr. Robert Levin, senior scientist at OSRAM SYLVANIA and member of the American Society for Photobiology, cabin fever's symptoms often can be reduced simply and inexpensively.

"Light -- and light quality -- affects how we perceive what is around us, and these impressions have psychological consequences," explains Dr. Levin. "If a Florida vacation is out of the question this year, cabin fever sufferers might consider re-examining their home lighting sources and decor."

"The idea," he says, "is to counteract the winter scenario of less daylight and a gloomy environment."

According to Dr. Levin, the deadening impact of long, cold winter nights can be offset by turning up the artificial illumination. But today's cost-conscious consumers can be reluctant to flick on the requisite number of lights needed to ward off those winter blues.

This is where the new breed of energy saving home light bulbs shine. "Many of today's fluorescent lamps, including compact fluorescent light bulbs, provide the warm soft light output of a regular incandescent, at a fraction of the energy cost," he says. "With these bulbs, 'house-bound' individuals can change their environment by increasing the light while still reducing their energy consumption and utility bills."

The compact fluorescent bulbs are direct replacements for incandescents in most household lighting applications, Dr. Levin points out.

While the amount of home lighting is important, a second factor is light color.

"Psychologically, the warm reds and oranges found in some sources of artificial 'white' light are far more pleasing than the cool blues and greens found in many older fluorescent bulbs such as those used in workshop or home service areas," Dr. Levin says.

"Also, there are new incandescent halogen bulbs today -- direct replacements for ordinary incandescents -- that provide brighter, whiter light quality and last up to three times as long."

RESEARCH NOW UNDERWAY

Cabin fever, or winter blues, is considered a relatively minor seasonal depression tied to the dim winter months. Seasonal Affective Disorder (S.A.D.), however, is recognized as a distinct disorder by the American Psychiatric Association. A professional practitioner should be sought if depression and the resultant "energy crisis" interferes with the completion of ordinary daily routines.

Scientists have long studied the relationship between seasonal depression and the curtailed daylight of winter. "One possible explanation," says Dr. Levin, "relates to the body's production of melatonin, a hormone secreted by the brain's pineal gland. There is a linkage between melatonin levels and the amount and duration of environmental lighting."

Generally produced at night, melatonin acts as a chemical signal, or cue, to the body that darkness is here. Melatonin production is suppressed by light levels somewhat higher than commonly used indoors.

"Studies on the relation between S.A.D. and the amount and duration of environmental light are underway," Dr. Levin says.

HOW TO COPE WITH THE BLEAK WINTER MONTHS

According to OSRAM SYLVANIA's Dr. Levin, people with seasonal depression tend to sleep more, have less energy and gain weight during the winter months. "Ages ago, weight gain and tiredness were adaptive changes that prepared the individual for the harshness of winter. Today, when you do less, and eat more, the resultant weight gain only makes one feel worse."

For those suffering from cabin fever, Dr. Levin offers these tips, which address the psychological roots of this syndrome:

- Check the amount and quality of your home's artificial lighting. "Today's energy efficient fluorescent bulbs enable you to replace incandescent lighting, increase overall lighting levels and cut electricity use without sacrificing light quality."
- Clean bulbs, lamp covers and fixtures. "A simple dusting can increase ambient light levels in your home."
- Re-examine your home decor. "Look for lighter paint schemes and lighter color furniture. Avoid large areas of dark woods, carpeting and wallpaper patterns."

- Exercise regularly. "Once you get clearance from your physician, an ongoing regimen of aerobic exercise will help clear away the gloom. A regular morning walk will do it."
- Eat sensibly. "Again, check with your physician, who can help tailor a balanced meal plan that's right for you."