



DECEMBER 2007

Issue No. 68

OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

# IN SIGHT

*for Oregon Lawyers*

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## COPING WITH WINTER DEPRESSION

During the fall and winter months, some people suffer from symptoms of depression that can appear gradually or come on all at once. These symptoms often dissipate when spring arrives and stay in remission through the summer months. Periods of depression that accompany seasonal changes can be a sign of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), a mood disorder attributed to the relative lack of light during the colder months of the year.

SAD has been linked to a biochemical imbalance in the brain brought on by the shortening of daylight hours and a lack of sunlight in winter. Symptoms of SAD usually begin in October or November and subside in March or April, but the most difficult months for SAD sufferers are January and February. Some evidence suggests that people who live far from the equator are more likely to develop SAD.

Between 10 and 20 percent of the U.S. population may suffer from mild symptoms associated with SAD. These symptoms include:

- excessive sleeping; difficulty staying awake; overeating; carbohydrate cravings; weight gain;
- extreme fatigue; inability to maintain regular lifestyle schedule;
- depression (sadness, loss of feelings, apathy) combined with irritability;
- lack of interest in social interactions; loss of interest in usual activities of enjoyment; and
- remission of symptoms in the spring and summer months.

People suffering from a mild case of SAD can benefit from additional exposure to the sun. Take a walk outside or try to arrange your home or office so you are near a window during the daytime. For many suffering from a more severe case of the condition, light therapy (phototherapy) has proven an effective treatment option.

This form of therapy involves exposure to very bright light (usually from a special fluorescent lamp) every day during the winter months. Additional relief has been found with psychotherapy sessions and, in some cases, prescription of antidepressants.

Another factor that can contribute to SAD is disruption of the body's natural circadian rhythm, which runs our biological clock and is directly influenced by light. Less daylight – and the reversion to standard time – can disrupt our sleep cycles, causing us to feel like crawling back in bed on winter mornings. Trying to keep to a regular sleep/wake schedule during the holidays can be especially challenging, but it may help reestablish your body's internal rhythm.

SAD can be confused with other medical conditions, such as hypothyroidism or viral infections like mononucleosis, so a proper evaluation by a medical professional is crucial. If you think you may be suffering from SAD, consult with your doctor to get an accurate diagnosis and discuss possible treatment options.

*Source: American Psychiatric Association, press release, November 23, 2004.*