

Optimise Exposure to Sunlight and Nature

It seems that sunlight and spending time in nature are natural mood-lifters and therefore form part of PI Therapy. There have been several interesting studies examining the mental benefits of sunlight. In one study, it was shown that inpatient treatment for depression was associated with a shorter stay in the hospital with more sunlight (11 days versus 14 days)¹⁶. In another study, workers seated next to a window reported greater job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and lower depressive and anxiety symptoms compared to people without a window¹⁷. It also seems that being born in a geographic region with more hours of daylight protects you from the onset of bipolar disorder¹⁸.

Even if you are not living in a region with lots of sunlight, your mood could also be lifted by spending time out in nature (green space). Pregnant women living in greener regions were 18 to 23% less likely to report depressive symptoms than those in the least greener regions¹⁹. Living in regions with greater vegetation and greater volume of birds in the afternoon was also associated with a lower rate of depression, anxiety, and stress. In fact, respondents living in neighbourhoods with vegetation cover of more than 20% experienced an 11% reduction in depressive symptoms and 17% reduction in symptoms of anxiety and stress²⁰.



GUIDELINES FOR SENSIBLE SUNLIGHT EXPOSURE

- Make sure you implement necessary precautions to minimise your risk of burning (i.e., clothing, sunscreen, hat).
- Depending on the strength of UV radiation, aim for approximately 15 to 30 minutes a day of sunlight exposure.
- Timing of sunlight exposure is important. Aim for greater exposure in the morning and early afternoon. Too much sunlight in the late afternoon may affect your sleep.
- Although Vitamin D may help improve mood, sunlight exposure (without necessarily increasing vitamin D levels) is important.
- Consider simple ways you can increase exposure to sunlight. Even opening blinds or sitting next to a window may be helpful.

Optimise The Timing of Your Light Exposure

While increasing exposure to light has positive effects on mood, the timing of this exposure must also be considered. Many of our hormones are released on a 24-hour body clock (called a circadian rhythm). Some hormones peak in the morning, while others are higher in the evening. For example, a sleep-inducing hormone called melatonin peaks around 9 to 10pm, while our stress hormone cortisol should be at its lowest in the evening and peak in the morning.

When there are imbalances in the circadian release of our hormones it can have a negative effect on our mood. Therefore, it is important to optimise this pattern of hormonal release by increasing light or sunlight exposure during the day (especially in the morning) and decreasing light exposure in the evening. There are several studies now confirming that a treatment called 'bright light therapy' is an effective treatment for depression and seasonal affective disorder. Bright light therapy involves the controlled exposure to morning light by using a specialised 'light box'.



GUIDELINES FOR OPTIMISING LIGHT EXPOSURE

INCREASE light exposure during the day

- Sit next to a window during the day (the closer you are to a window the more light you will receive)
- Open the blinds or curtains during the day
- Eat your breakfast beside a window, or if weather permits, eat outside
- Have meals, drinks, or breaks outside in the sunlight
- Walk outdoors during your breaks
- Minimise unnecessary sunglasses use in the morning
- Exercise outdoors during the day
- Drive to work without sunglasses (especially for short drives)
- Wake-up with a light alarm clock (also called a sunrise clock)

DECREASE light exposure at night

- Turn off unnecessary lights in the evening
- Use lamps in the evening (especially lamps that are facing down or away from your eyes)
- If you need to wake up at night to go the toilet or to get a drink, keep lights to a minimum (install battery-powered light sensors)
- Reduce blue-lights on screens at night by installing/using the following:
 - For a PC or android phones install f.lux (available free from www.justgetflux.com)
 - For your iPhone and iPad, turn on 'nightshift mode'
 - For Samsung phones, turn on the 'blue-light filter'
 - For your TV, purchase 'drift TV' (available from www.seesafron.com/drift-tv-box)
- Install dimmer switches
- Install lower-powered lights in rooms where you spend a lot of time in the evening, such as your bedroom
- Use blue-light filtering glasses

Potential goals to increase the appropriate exposure to sunlight and nature

Set some potential SMART goals to help optimise your exposure to sunlight and nature. Consider practical, easy, and sensible options. Even consider changes you can make at home or work to increase sunlight and exposure to plants, nature, and greenery.
