



AuSM's highly trained, certified therapists have committed their careers to helping individuals with autism understand their diagnosis and address both the challenges and gifts that it can bring. The AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team sends out a monthly e-mail to answer questions submitted by the autism community. This is one of the past issues of the column. Visit www.ausm.org to sign up to receive the e-mails.

Dear Therapist:

For a long time, I know winter has been a time when I feel worse than usual. I'm crabby and easily annoyed. I don't want to do anything. And getting chores done just seems impossible. I just saw a Tik Tok about Seasonal Affective Disorder and now think that is what I am experiencing. Is this common for autistics and is there anything I can do? I already take my antidepressant regularly.

- Blue in Minnesota, Not Just From the Cold

Dear Blue:

Yes! Autistic people absolutely experience seasonal affective disorder just like anyone else can. In fact, some autistic people will even have seasonal affective disorder present in seasons other than winter for a variety of reasons. But I'll focus on winter today.

There's a lot about Minnesota winters that make them challenging. There's a shift from being outside to inside more, there's the disruption from the December holidays, there's a lot less light, and IT'S COLD. I've been told by several medical providers that Vitamin D plays a very important role in managing how we're doing through the winter months, so I decided to look for a peer-reviewed article about it. I found one that was published in 2010 (so a smidge outdated) but it was published in the *Journal of Photochemistry and Photobiology B: Biology*, so it's wonderfully nerdy. The article identifies the importance of Vitamin D as related to mental health. One thing the article highlighted is that Vitamin D (calcitriol) has a role in increasing the availability of dopamine, which plays an important role in our mood and executive function. The article also discusses the efficacy of light therapy for increasing Vitamin D levels and, interestingly, they report that the efficacy cannot be "confirmed or dismissed," which I thought was very interesting as I have been told by many medical professionals that light boxes are recommended.



However, the article also stated that there is strong evidence that low availability of certain frequencies of light do contribute to depression. So, as is often the case in science, there is not a firm answer yet as to whether light therapy is a guaranteed intervention. The article does seem to support finding some way to increase Vitamin D but it's best to discuss this with medically-trained professionals, as supplements are not regulated in the United States – so it can be difficult to figure out what's best for you. And, of course, you want to make sure it's not counter indicated for you based on current medications or your physical health needs.

Beyond medical intervention, some of the things I've found helpful to manage winter is making sure I stay connected to my friends, pushing myself through the lack of motivation to keep up with important tasks, and movement/exercise. My other favorite thing is to surround myself with plants (and plant lights). I've even managed to get some of my plants to bloom in the winter, and it helps me stave off the winter blues a lot. If having plants isn't interesting to you, you could visit the Como Conservatory or the Minnesota Arboretum to get some green-time and – an added bonus – the air around those plants is refreshing!

Also, remember that winter will end. If you've been taught Defusion or other CBT skills, those can be helpful to remember that how you're feeling in a single moment will change, and you just have to let it pass. There are videos online about how to use Defusion from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, and that's very helpful for letting unwanted thoughts pass.

– **Beth Pitchford, MA. LPCC – Therapist, Autism Society of Minnesota**

If you would like to submit a question for the AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team, please e-mail autismcounseling@ausm.org or contact us at 651.647.1083.