

By Stephanie M. Aguilon

Fighting through the gray

I roll over in bed and reach for my phone to check the time. “It’s 8:30 a.m.!” I say to myself. “How did that happen? I must have turned my alarm off and fallen back to sleep.” After some deep breaths, I manage to drag myself out of bed, get dressed, and make breakfast. At work I try to focus, but most of the day I just sit in a fog, struggling to stay awake. When I head home, I lack the motivation to go to the gym, do errands, or hang out with friends. Instead, I fall asleep on the couch shortly after dinner, only making it to bed after some gentle prodding from my dog.

Early in my Ph.D., this felt like my near daily routine. I attributed my newfound difficulties to the stress of starting a Ph.D. program and being far from home. But it was odd: Before graduate school, I was an early riser and thought most clearly in the mornings. I couldn’t understand why I was suddenly unable to get out of bed. I felt guilty about my lack of focus and frustrated that I was no longer capitalizing on my best working hours.

After 2 years, a light bulb went off in my head. I realized that my tiredness and depression came during the gloomy winter months. That was the clue that pointed me toward a solution.

I had grown up and gone to college in Arizona, where a lack of sunlight was never an issue. My first experience living elsewhere came when I started graduate school in upstate New York, which is notoriously gray during the winters, with low-hanging clouds blanketing the region day in and day out. The prospect of cold and snowy winters was scary, but I was thrilled to have the opportunity to study in a top program in my field.

Once there, I heard people on campus talk—and, unfortunately, joke—about seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a severe form of “winter blues” that’s triggered by low light levels. As my health and well-being took a downturn each winter, eventually I realized that SAD might be the cause, and I needed to do something about it.

A website suggested an alarm clock that simulates the sunrise, becoming brighter and brighter as your wake-up time approaches. I decided to give that a try. It turned out to be a lifesaver, helping me get out of bed in the morning on time and feeling rested. That first taste of a successful solution spurred me to visit a doctor, who confirmed my self-diagnosis and suggested a few other things I could try.



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It was a relief to discover that my condition had a name and that I could take steps to feel better. Now in the fifth year of my Ph.D., I no longer dread the arrival of winter because I finally have a solid strategy to deal with SAD. I have a much easier time getting up and starting my day if I stick with a regular routine. So, I wake up when my sunrise-simulating alarm clock tells me to—at the same time each day—and soak up a daily dose of artificial rays by basking in front of a full-spectrum light therapy box. And as much as possible, I make the journey home to sunny Arizona for a few weeks during the winter months, although that’s not always feasible on my grad student stipend.

Most important, I’ve learned to be kinder to myself. I’ve always been a high achiever in all aspects of my life, so it has been difficult to give myself a break when I fall short of my ambitious self-imposed deadlines. The reality is that, despite my best efforts, my winter self still struggles to muster the kind of energy and motivation that propels me during the summer months—and I’ve come to accept that. My experience with SAD has also heightened my awareness that I need to prioritize my health in the future, when choosing a place to live long term. I’m still glad I chose to attend the grad school I did, but I don’t want to keep paying the psychological cost of living in a gloomy place. I know my need for sunshine will limit potential job options, but it’s important for me to find a place that works for both my personal and professional life.

For now, though, I’m celebrating the fact that the days are getting longer, and spring is just around the corner. ■

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