

## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### Brain Health Matters and Sunlight Makes a Difference

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Today, we are looking at protecting yourself against the brain illness Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), avoiding the winter blues, and boosting your brain health.*

Winter, and the desire to avoid it, is one of the reasons many of us choose to live in, or visit, Florida. And while we can avoid the bone-chilling cold and hazardous ice and snow living here on the Suncoast, we still have to deal with the shorter days.

Most of us just grumble about a 5:30 p.m. sunset, but for others the longer hours of darkness can signal the onset of seasonal affective disorder, or SAD. A form of depression, SAD seems to be triggered by reduced exposure to sunlight. The disorder typically appears during the fall or winter months and subsides in the spring.

The symptoms of SAD are similar to those of depression — including low energy, sluggishness, irritability, changes in appetite, and changes in sleep patterns. An article from [Harvard Health Publishing](#) says that while the causes of SAD aren't fully understood, many theories suggest an out-of-sync body clock may be the culprit. Light therapy seems to help those people who suffer with this disorder, but the light needs to enter through the eyes in order to be effective.

For those in the northern states, a light box can increase their exposure to light and help offset their symptoms. Luckily for us in the Sunshine State, we have an abundance of natural sunlight. Even with the shorter days, experiencing just 30 minutes of sunlight a day can help offset the symptoms of SAD.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO BOOST YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Here are some suggestions from the BHI for bringing light into your life and avoiding or reducing symptoms of SAD.

- **Get out and into the light.** Sunlight exposure is the easiest way to ward off the winter blues. Take a walk while the sun's out, even if it's cloudy. Aim for 30 minutes a day, but just 10 or 15 minutes can improve your mood.
- **Watch what you eat.** You may be craving sweets or pasta and mashed potatoes but eating a diet high in sugar and starch can lead to fatigue and weight gain. Boost your energy with a brain healthy diet rich in vitamins and minerals, including colorful fruit and veggies, whole grains, lean protein, and low-fat dairy.
- **Take your vitamins.** Multivitamins or supplements can help you get the nutrients you need. Researchers think that a lack of vitamin D may play a role in SAD and other brain illnesses so include it in your list of supplements, or add fatty fish, eggs, liver and fortified foods to your diet.
- **Get moving.** Exercise protects brain health in part by producing endorphins, the feel-good hormones that increase your energy levels. If you need a boost try exercise instead of caffeine. Get outside for a 30-minute walk or run and you get a boost of sunlight with your exercise.
- **Engage with friends.** The COVID-19 pandemic has made it difficult to engage socially, but even virtual conversation can boost your brain performance and improve your outlook. Call, text, or video conference with someone you haven't seen lately and watch your mood improve.
- **Get help if you need it.** If nothing seems to help your symptoms, talk to a healthcare professional. There are therapies available to help with your seasonal depression and a professional can recommend the best course of treatment for you.
- **Be Brain Healthy** and adopt a lifestyle that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote:
  - Stress resilience
  - Nutrition
  - Physical activity
  - Sleep
  - Social connection
  - Emotional wellbeing
  - Meaning and Purpose
  - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
  - Engaging with nature
  - General health
  - Positive impacts

### **About the Brain Health Initiative ([www.brainhealthinitiative.org](http://www.brainhealthinitiative.org))**

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is a collaborative effort with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the brain health movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference***. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).