

Let There Be Light, Part 1: The Importance of Light

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October 14, 2026

Not only is it beautifully poetic, but the pleasure of a bright, sunny morning can boost our mood significantly. In fact, the relationship between light and our mental health extends far beyond the psychological pleasure of sunshine. Light is a powerful biological signal that influences our sleep, energy, alertness, and emotional well-being.

Recent research reinforces this wisdom -- **our daily pattern of light exposure may be an important, and often overlooked, contributor to mental wellbeing.**

Our Eyes Do More Than See

Within the retina are specialized nerve cells called *intrinsically photosensitive retinal ganglion cells*, or **ipRGCs**. Unlike the rods and cones that allow us to see shapes, colors, and movement, these cells contain a light-sensitive pigment called *melanopsin*. They help communicate information about environmental light to the brain.

One of their most important destinations is the brain's internal biological clock, located in a region called the *suprachiasmatic nucleus* (SCN). This clock helps coordinate our **circadian rhythms**, the approximately 24-hour biological cycles that regulate sleep, wakefulness, hormone secretion, and many other bodily functions.

Interestingly, research suggests that ipRGCs also communicate with brain regions involved in alertness and emotional processing. This means that light may influence our mood through pathways beyond its effects on sleep alone (Schmidt et al. 2011).

Why Morning Light Matters

Our brains use the daily cycle of light and darkness to distinguish day from night. Exposure to light in the morning generally helps shift our internal clock earlier, encouraging wakefulness during the day and supporting an earlier onset of sleep at night.

By contrast, bright light late in the evening can delay our internal clock and suppress the production of melatonin, a hormone involved in preparing the body for sleep. Light can also increase alertness directly, even without changing the timing of our biological clock. In other words, **morning light helps tell our brains when to be awake, while evening darkness helps prepare us for sleep.**

Brighter Days, Darker Nights

A growing body of research suggests that our overall pattern of light exposure matters. Large population studies have found that people exposed to more light during the day tend to report fewer depressive symptoms, while greater exposure to light at night is associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbances (Spitschan & Zauner, 2026). These findings do not necessarily prove that inadequate daylight causes depression. After all, depression itself may lead people to spend more time indoors, disrupting their normal patterns of light exposure.

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that maintaining a clear distinction between bright days and dark nights may help support healthy circadian rhythms and emotional well-being. Modern life often works against this natural pattern. Many of us spend our days indoors under relatively dim artificial lighting, only to surround ourselves with bright lights and electronic screens late into the evening.

Light and Depression

The relationship between light and mood becomes particularly apparent in *seasonal affective disorder* (SAD), a form of depression that follows a seasonal pattern, often emerging during the darker winter months. Bright-light therapy has been used to treat seasonal depression since the 1980s. More recent clinical studies also support its potential effectiveness in nonseasonal depression, sometimes alongside antidepressant medications (Lam et al. 2016).

This is particularly relevant in Alaska, where the dramatic seasonal variation in daylight can make maintaining consistent sleep-wake rhythms challenging. Researchers are also investigating how light affects brain regions involved in emotional processing, raising the possibility that its antidepressant effects are not explained entirely by improvements in sleep.

Bringing More Light into Everyday Life

You do not necessarily need a specialized light box to develop healthier light habits. Consider a few simple practices:

- **Get outside in the morning.** Natural daylight can help reinforce the timing of your internal clock, even when the sky is overcast.
- **Seek daylight throughout the day.** Outdoor walks and other daytime activities provide opportunities for brighter light exposure.
- **Maintain consistent sleep and wake times.** Regular routines help reinforce the body's circadian rhythms.
- **Dim the lights in the evening.** Reducing bright artificial lighting before bedtime can help avoid delaying your biological clock.
- **Keep your sleeping environment dark.** Minimize unnecessary light exposure during the night.

For individuals experiencing significant seasonal depression, structured bright-light therapy may be worth discussing with a healthcare professional. Treatment requires additional care for people with bipolar disorder because bright-light therapy can sometimes trigger hypomania or mania.

A Simple but Powerful Environmental Influence

Mental health is shaped by many interacting factors, including genetics, relationships, physical activity, sleep, and our environment. Light is one of these influences, and unlike many others, it is something we can often modify through small changes in our daily routines. Although researchers continue to investigate exactly how light affects mood and cognition, the emerging evidence offers a compelling

message: **a healthy daily rhythm of bright days and dark nights may be one of the simplest ways to support our mental well-being.**

References

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