A Dark Bedroom for Depression

Evening light causes depression, even in small amounts. In a 2018 study, sleeping with a mere night light on doubled the risk of depression over the next 5 years, and that risk went up as the bedroom light got brighter.

Light passes through the eyelids while we sleep, and the eyes are particularly sensitive to blue-wavelengths of light. Special receptors in the eyes respond only to blue light, and it is these receptors that regulate sleep and mood by setting the biological clock.

A dark bedroom improves mood, deepens sleep, and strengthens metabolism. That means weight loss. In a study of 44,000 people, the more light in their bedroom, the more weight they gained.

How to get it real dark

- Blackout curtains (such as ShiftShade, or the DIY solution: buy blackout fabric, cut to fit your window, and attach with pins or Velcro tape).
- Press aluminum foil against the window panes and attach with painter's tape.
- Sleep in the basement.
- Place black electrical tape over LED lights on electronic devices.
- Purchase a draft snake or use a rolled up towel to cover the bottom of the door.

Fear of the dark

What if you can't sleep without light? Try a low-blue nightlight:

- Click *Lighting Products* at LowBlueLights.com
- GE SleepLite
- Beams MB720A Night Light
- Bulb: Harth Sleep-Shift Sleep Ready Light
- For reading in bed: Harth Blue Light Blocking Book Light.

People with mood disorders have fragile biological clocks, and are more sensitive to disruptions of night and day.

Some people keep the TV on at night to drown out depressive thoughts. Unfortunately, the light from the TV causes more depression. Instead, try relaxing music or a boring audio book.

Darkness before bed

Before electricity, the world went dark around 6-8 pm and the only light was the yellowish light from a candle or the stars. Today's nights are flooded with blue light from phones, screens, and energy efficient bulbs. Blue light tells the brain "it's morning," shutting down the melatonin system that puts us to sleep.

Sleep is deeper when people get a good dose of darkness before bed, like 1-3 hours. Unfortunately, it's not easy to spend every evening in the dark. One solution is to wear

blue light blocking glasses before bed. The world looks bright and clear through these lenses, but with an amber hue. When you put them on, melatonin rises and your brain will think it's in a pitch dark room.

Wear them 1-2 hours before bed, and put them on if you have to get out of bed during the night. You don't need to wear them while asleep; that's what the pitch darkness is for. Do not wear them during the day – that will mess up your biological clock.

Blue light blockers are popular, but most of the brands do not filter enough light to be useful. Find an effective pair at:

moodtreatmentcenter.com/bluelight

Morning sunrise

One problem with a pitch-dark room is that you'll miss out on the morning sunlight, an important cue that shifts brain chemistry into daytime mode. Morning light is just as important as evening darkness for mood. A dawn simulator can bring that effect by creating an artificial sunrise in your room:

moodtreatmentcenter.com/dawnsimulator

A sleep mask is another way to create bedroom darkness. It works well, but might prevent the mood-lifting benefits of a dawn simulator.

Shift Work Syndrome

Night shift work is linked to the same health risks as evening light. Those include: depression, bipolar, fatigue, heart disease, cancer, diabetes, obesity, irritability, and poor concentration. With shift work, the problem is caused by a mismatch between sleep schedule and light exposure. Adjusting the light exposure with the techniques mentioned above is very helpful to shift workers:

1. *Artificial sunset.* Wear blue-light filtering glasses 2-3 hours before bed.
2. *Artificial night.* Sleep in a pitch dark room.
3. *Artificial sunrise.* Use a dawn simulator to wake up.

Some shift workers may also benefit from a lightbox in the "morning" (that is, when they wake up). Lightboxes give a more powerful dose of light than a dawn simulator, and can be used in conjunction with them:

moodtreatmentcenter.com/lightbox

There are also medications that help people adjust to the night shift (e.g. modafinil/Provigil and armodafinil/Nuvigil).

Full moons

The night was not always dark in the age before electricity. Every month, a full moon draped the sky with bluish light. The link between blue evening light and mental illness is so strong that people noticed it even then. The word "lunatic" comes from lunar, the Latin word for moon. Even in the modern world we can still see this effect. Psychiatric emergency rooms get a little more crowded when the moon is full.

—Chris Aiken, M.D., updated 5/7/2024