

# SPECTRUM

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SEE SHERRY SPEAK

## Shedding light on dark winter moods

by Sherry A. Morin

See Bob and Greta. See Bob and Greta roll snowballs. Tim doesn't want to play. Tim is sad. Tim does not like winter. Why is Tim so sad? See Tim frown. See Tim go home. See Tim sleep all day.

It's the finale of winter. Everything seems to be one color—dirty white. The weather is cold. Your nose is running, and so are you, because you have papers due. You're low, really low, but don't worry. You're normal.

Academically, This part of the term is a very stressful time of year. That in itself would be enough to cause great psychological disruption. Coupled with those Winter-that-just-won't-go-away Blahs, exam-time stress can seriously weigh down your mood.

People sometimes feel down during the winter months for a wide variety of reasons. In the winter-time, we are forced to stay inside more than usual, to brave the cold (when we do venture out), and we are condemned to those eternal Maritime drudgeries such as shovelling heaped snow.

Studies have indicated that many people experience a post-Christmas emotional low. The holidays are usually very physically draining. Furthermore, many months are spent building up expectations for the holiday season. When the holidays seem to flash by quickly or are less festive than expected, many people are left feeling cheated; still unrested, they return to the workplace. From a darker and

more obscure perspective, winter may mark the death of a family member or a friend. This could provoke recurrent depression each year around the time of the death.

The causes of winter depression listed above are all related to people's behaviors or social environments. There is, however, a fairly common form of depression which is alleged to have physiological roots.

This form of depression is called *seasonal affective disorder*. It's also known by the acronym, "SAD", which really says a lot about the kinds of feelings elicited by the condition.

The basic hypothesis behind SAD is that people who suffer from it have light receptor mechanisms that don't perform too well when exposed to an extended decrease in light. Such a prolonged decrease in light occurs during the winter months. Presumably, failure of retinal receptors to respond to decreased light levels disturbs people's "natural flows", or internal time-clocks that regulate bodily and mental processes. These "natural flows" or time-clocks are called circadian rhythms. When people with S.A.D. have their circadian rhythms disturbed by (their failure to biologically respond to) lack of light, they become depressed.

S.A.D. is a potentially serious disorder; it can greatly "darken" one's outlook and alter a person's behavior. The number of cases seems to increase with distance away from the equator. In other words, there are probably more

people with S.A.D. in Alaska than there are in Bermuda. The reason for this has to do with the slant of the rays of the sun. As one progresses farther north on the globe, the rays of the sun hit the earth at increasingly sharper angles, so that a person way up north (like my friend, Steve,) would appear to be bombarded with less intense light than would a person lying on a beach in Bermuda.

There are some things that you can do to improve your mood during the lingering winter weeks. The most obvious way is to visit some balmy equatorial region. Consider, though, that flying off to Bermuda may not be the best solution, because the touch-down back in New Brunswick might cause greater trauma than you'd been through originally.

Since our metabolisms slow down during cold weather periods, many people are left feeling lethargic, or lacking will and energy. You can aid this problem by exercising more. Also, it helps to get outside as much as possible, as the ventilation systems in most university buildings don't do much for people's health. Treat yourself to little perks; change your furniture around, alter the color scheme of your favorite room, and wear brighter clothes. Drink more hot cocoa. Socialize a little more than usual; many people likely feel the same as you, so they can empathize. The importance of socializing cannot be stressed enough, because it provides opportunities for talking over problems with friends—a healthy, necessary and cathartic

SAD! 'Tis the season for feeling down.



process.

If you find that your low mood can't be helped, and is hindering you to a great degree—for example, keeping you away from classes and your work, or severely affecting your physical well-being, then you may want to look into the problem

by seeking some counselling. True mental depression, whether it's seasonal or constant, is no laughing matter. If it were, fewer people would suffer from it.

That's it, kiddies. Thanks for seeing me speak every other week. Take care.

Positively Pink

## Statistics, damned statistics and downright lies

MYTHS/ Some statistical "facts" have become urban myths—part of our intellectual baggage, like the 2.3 child family and the 10% homosexual content of the general population.

by Adrian Park

If the shade of Sam Clemens will pardon the misquotation above, stats have become an indispensable part of human discourse. As statistics are the meat of most research in the "hard" and "soft" sciences, scientists are (or should be) well aware of the need for context—to have an assessment of the significance of a statistical "fact", the size of sample, the degree of error, the reproducibility, to name a few such qualifying parameters. Outside the scientific world statistics are often banded about with such (I hesitate to say gay) abandon, as to be rendered meaningless. Some statistical "facts" have become urban myths—part of our intellectual baggage, like the 2.3 child family and the 10% homosexual content of the general population.

Where did that last figure originate? Kinsey, you may say—everyone knows that! Well, call me anal retentive if you must, but I have

tried to track it down (we Virgos are such sticklers for detail!), and its source is as elusive as hen's teeth.

Now Kinsey's 1948 report, for all its flaws, remains something of a landmark, so let's start there. Actually Kinsey's groundbreaking study came out in two parts, with the report on male sexuality appearing in 1948, and the companion volume on female sexuality appearing five years later. Kinsey and co-workers developed a seven point scale for accessing the sexuality of a subject based largely on sexual practice and non-contact arousal. Someone whose sexuality was entirely "hetero" scored 0, an entirely "homo" subject scored 6. Around 3.5% of the 12,000 men (aged 16-55), and a slightly higher percentage of women, scored 6. It should be remembered that at this time all expression of male homosexuality was illegal, and Kinsey appreciated that lack of complete candor in the subjects may have led

to an underestimate. Anyway, it was not this statistic that caused the excitement (and controversy). The report also stated that 35-40% of the men scored between 1 and 5, i.e. had at some stage, usually in adolescence, had some homosexual experience to the point of orgasm. Deliberately excluded from this profiling were abusive experiences—sexual partners were usually from the subjects own age and peer group. Sometimes known as the "God-was-I-drunk-last-night-syndrome", these results and their significance has been debated ever since. What also emerges, is that the 10% figure so often quoted since, is a journalistic guesstimate derived from Kinsey's 4-5 grouping, and is not a figure given any significance in the original reports. More recently published data, such as the British Medical Journal/Wellcome Institute survey in the UK, actually vindicate Kinsey's results quite well. Exclusively homosexual individuals formed 3.5-4% of a

large general sample (c. 10,000 subjects from the general population, rather than Kinsey's, though the assessment methodologies were not directly comparable.

Why should this have any significance at all? Well, if such minutiae could be left to fans of "Trivial Pursuits", it would have no significance whatsoever outside academic circles. Unfortunately sexual statistics have become fodder for insatiable appetite of the very more hysterical claims of the "moral" right wing and their fundamentalist allies. Kinsey has come under fire for "over-estimating" the gay/lesbian percentage of the population at "10%" when more recent work suggests a lower figure. To be fair, some gay and lesbian authorities also cite the 10% figure as though it were Holy Writ, rather than a journalistic phantasm designed as an attention grabbing headline (imagine the consequences if a financial journalist played such games with share price reportage!).

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While it may be marginally more comforting to be a member of a 10% than a 3-5% minority, ultimately self-esteem depends on the outlook of the individual. As for the quest for basic human rights, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (and the US Bill of Rights) makes no mention of a quorum, or the need for approval by the majority, before the rights of the minorities are guaranteed. The numbers involved are irrelevant. Leave "urban myths" to the myth-makers, who should be reminded, once again in Mark Twain's words, that there are "few things more poisonous than the truth used with malice."