

# Dark Therapy

One cause of mood disorders is a breakdown of the body's internal clock. This is why regular sleep is a key part of recovery. For example, regular wake times can double a person's response to antidepressants. Among all mood disorders, the ones that are most sensitive to changes in your biological clock are bipolar mania, mixed states and rapid cycling (see back).

There are ways to fix a broken biological clock, and doing so works as well as medication. In fact, many of the hormones that run the biological clock are also marketed as medications: cortisol, epinephrine, and melatonin.

Doing key activities at regular times (give or take 30 minutes) each day will help set your clock. The time you wake up, eat meals, exercise, do major activities, and socialize are among the most important.

Ideally, you would also fall asleep at the same time each night, but that's hard to do. You can force yourself awake (morning light helps), but it's harder to force yourself asleep, and I don't recommend trying it. Trying to sleep activates your stress hormones, which makes it harder to relax.

Fortunately, studies have found that regular darkness at night can work just as well as regular sleep-times, especially for people in mania, mixed states and rapid cycling.

## A Famous Case

Mr. J was a man who had suffered from rapid cycling. He went in and out of mania and depression for many years. His condition was so untreatable that he went to the National Institutes of Health for help in the 1990s. They treated him with a routine of total darkness for 14 hours every night (from 6 P.M. to 8 A.M.). There was a bed but he was not required to sleep, and much of the time he couldn't. With

this *dark therapy*, he improved so rapidly that they lowered the enforced darkness from 14 hours to 10 hours each night (10 P.M. to 8 A.M.). Without changing his meds, that regimen kept him well for over a year thereafter.

Since then, further studies have confirmed these benefits. *Dark therapy* helps people stay well on fewer medicines, and can prevent mania if it's started when symptoms first appear.



## Traditional Dark Therapy

Traditional dark therapy requires total darkness. Even a distant street lamp, or a brief flick-on of the bathroom lights, can reverse its effects. Use black-out curtains if necessary or sleep in a windowless room. The basement is great: colder temperatures at night (e.g. 60-65°) help set the biological clock, especially when accompanied by warmer ones in the morning.

If your symptoms are severe, start with a full 14 hours (6 P.M. to 8 A.M.) of total darkness, and transition to 10 hours (10 P.M. to 8 A.M.) as you start to recover. When transitioning, adjust by 1 hour every two nights (e.g. darkness at 7 P.M. for two nights, then 8 P.M. for two nights, until you reach 10 P.M.). If lowering the time spent in darkness makes your symptoms worse, just back-track and increase your dark-exposure by an hour. For milder symptoms, you can start with 10 hours of darkness.

Do not use dark therapy during the day. Remember the idea is to set your clock, and daytime light will help.

Be careful to avoid computers, television and smart phones – the blue light they emit is the most disruptive to sleep. That brings us to an easier way to do dark therapy. You can get most of these benefits by wearing blue-light filters during those 10-14 hours.

### Dark Therapy the Easy Way

There's a special receptor in our eye that detects blue light, and the brain uses that signal to set the biological clock. Blue light is helpful in the morning, but when you get too much of it at night it can cause mania (as well as depression). Amber colored glasses can block 90% of the blue light, and wearing them at night can work almost as well as dark therapy.

The two models below were recommended by *Consumer Reports* and independent physicians:



- Uvex Ultraspec 2000, model S0360X (\$7 at Amazon). This one fits over regular glasses.
- Uvex Skyper, model 3S1933X (\$7-11 at Amazon).

You should still keep the lights down low while wearing these. You wouldn't want to sleep with them on, so you'll still need a way to create total darkness while asleep. Light passes through your eyelids, so try black-out curtains, a windowless room or a sleep mask.

### Other Health Benefits

Evening light has been also been linked to cancer, diabetes, heart disease, and obesity. There are other ways to reduce blue-light, such as apps and special bulbs, but those alone won't replicate dark therapy. Read more at: [www.moodtreatmentcenter.com/bluelight.pdf](http://www.moodtreatmentcenter.com/bluelight.pdf)

—Chris Aiken, M.D., updated 8/20/2016

## Conditions with Broken Clocks

**Mania and Hypomania.** Here everything is turned up. Energy is heightened, thoughts are faster, temper flares, and other emotions change so quickly that you may seem unpredictable to others. These states can feel good, but often have an uncomfortable anxiety that feels physical, like a restless impatience. Mania and hypomania have the same symptoms. Mania is the more severe version, and often involves more impulsivity.

**Mixed States.** When the hyper symptoms of mania overlap with the lows of depression it's called a mixed state. It's like being pulled in opposite directions – "Tired and wired, driven to do something but I don't know what to do." Anxiety, irritability, irregular energy and sleep, and lots of physical symptoms – these are hallmarks of mixed states.

**Rapid Cycling.** When this happens, people go in and out of a mood episode at least 4 times a year. Each episode usually lasts 2-4 weeks. It may mean 4 depressions a year, or depressions that cycle with mania. If the cycling is faster, such as monthly, it's called *ultra-rapid cycling*.

**Seasonal Depression.** These episodes usually start in Fall or Winter. Morning light, which you can get from a lightbox, is more critical in treating this than dark therapy.

**Sleep phase delay.** This just means you're a night owl. It's common in adolescence – teenagers have particular trouble falling asleep before 11pm. If this is interfering with your life, dark therapy can help. You may need to force yourself to wake up early and avoid naps during the day as well.

**Circadian disorders.** These include jet-lag and shift work syndrome. They often feel like depression, and they benefit from dark and light therapy just as mood disorders do. In shift work, you need to create artificial cues for morning and evening since the sun won't guide you. Dark therapy during your night dawn simulators or light-boxes during your morning can help. For jet lag, there is a guide at: [www.moodtreatmentcenter.com/jetlag.pdf](http://www.moodtreatmentcenter.com/jetlag.pdf)