



Here's How Sunlight Can Impact Your Mood—And Your Overall Mental Health

A lack of sunshine in your life could be more damaging than you think.

By Zee Krstic | June 18, 2019



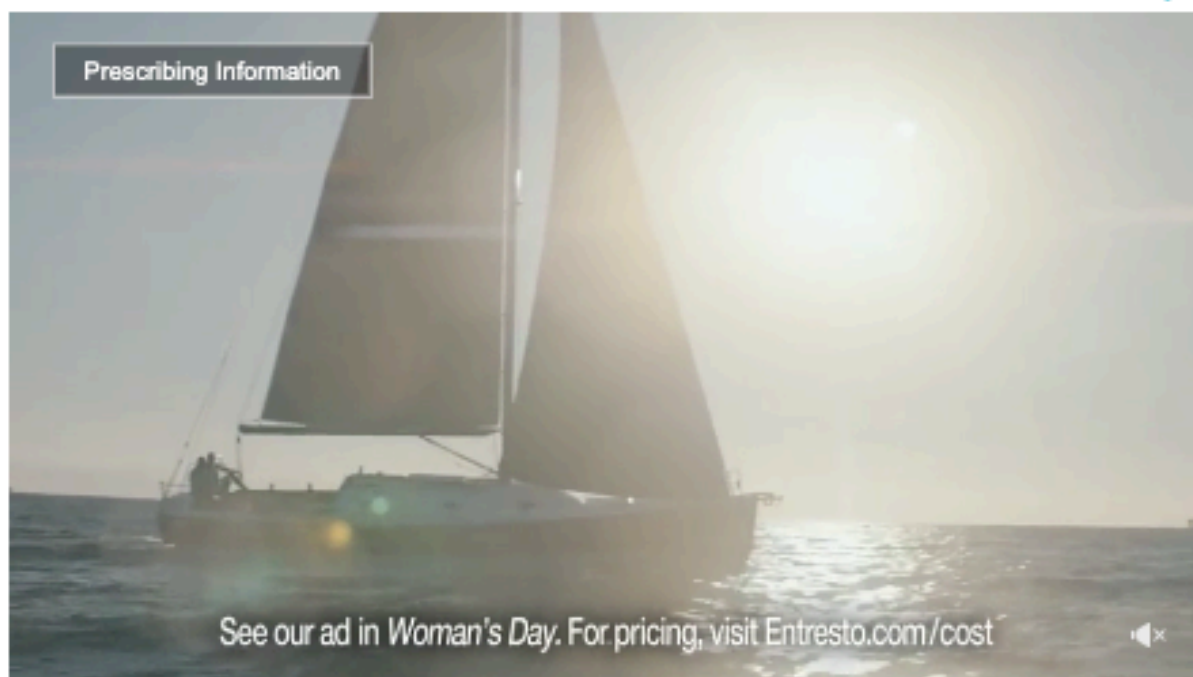
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Spending time outdoors in the sunshine feels great, and previous research has suggested that there are specific health benefits associated with being outside, especially as it relates to cardiovascular health. But if you've ever felt compelled to throw open your shades first thing in the morning, or have been jockeying for the sunbathed desk by the window at work, you know that even indirect exposure to sunlight can drastically affect your psyche.

That's because sunlight directly impacts our mental and physical health, and can have far-reaching influences beyond the common "winter blues." "It's a really broad area of research," says Arie Greenleaf, Ph.D., a professor of counseling at Seattle University, "but researchers are beginning to understand the scope of sunlight's effect on essential functions."

For most, a lack of sunlight can lead to what's commonly known as seasonal depression, referred to clinically as Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD. The condition is a form of depression that can lead to sedentary behavior and cause people to spend more time inside (and away from natural light). Limited outdoor time isn't just a winter-season problem: Modern work schedules keep people indoors as well. A recent study commissioned by skylight manufacturers Velux found that, on average, 63 percent of Americans spend less than one hour outside each day, which can be detrimental to your fitness and cardiovascular health in addition to psychological well-being.

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"There's substantial correspondence to SAD occurrence rates and latitude positions in the United States; the rates of people experiencing SAD rise dramatically the further north you go," Greenleaf says. Referencing recent research, Greenleaf adds that just about four percent of the population in Florida experience SAD symptoms year round—that number jumps to about 28 percent of the population for those living in cities in Alaska.