

# Evening Wind-Down

Developing a wind-down routine in the evening helps stabilize mood and deepen sleep. To help you wind down at night, think of activities that are passive, meditative, relaxing, or just boring. These activities shouldn't compel you to stay up late doing more and more. They often have no goal other than to lull you into sleep. Examples include:

- Mindfulness meditation
- Journaling
- Visualizing pleasant scenes or abstract shapes
- Stretching
- Deep or rhythmic breathing
- Reading a dull book
- Doing a repetitive, boring chore
- Preparing clothes or food for the next day

What's right for some is wrong for others. For example, people who enjoy getting things neat and straight might find that folding clothes winds them up, while for others it's a bore. What are some activities that could help you wind down at night?

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In contrast, you want to avoid energizing activities at night. Move those things to the morning where they will help you wake up faster. The following are some examples of energizing activities:

- Problem solving
- Worrying
- Exciting projects
- Intense conversations
- Shopping
- Entertainment

## Blue Light

There's something in the evening air that worsens sleep, depression, and bipolar disorder. It's classified by the World Health Organization as a possible carcinogen, and it's been linked to weight gain, diabetes, heart disease, and cancers of the breast and prostate (Lunn et al., 2017). It's hard to get away from, but it's easy to filter out. It's blue light.

Blue spectrum light regulates the body's internal clock. Electronic devices, television screens, and energy-efficient bulbs are all strong emitters of this wavelength. Blue light doesn't always look blue. When mixed with other colors, it appears white, like the glow of a florescent bulb. Small screens may seem innocent, but reading a smartphone at close range gives the same dose of blue light as watching a large TV screen from across the room.

In pre-electric days, blue light faded at night, leaving only the yellow glow of stars and candles. Melatonin rose as the sun set, and fell in the morning as the sky turned bright blue. This routine was disrupted once a month by a full blue moon. Ancient beliefs that the lunar cycle caused mental health problems were so strong that the word "lunatic" became a synonym for mania. A lot of old medical beliefs were faulty, but not this one. There is an uptick in visits to the psychiatric emergency room on nights of a full moon (Erren & Lewis, 2019).

Clients don't have to disconnect the power at night to fix this problem. Blue light blocking glasses filter out the blue spectrum. Wearing them before bed improves sleep, mood, and physical health. Unlike sunglasses, blue light blocking glasses don't darken the view, but they do infuse it with a warm, yellow glow. People can still read, watch TV, and do their usual activities with them on (though, for safety reasons, they shouldn't be used while driving or operating dangerous machinery). Lately, everyone from sports figures to Hollywood celebrities is donning these amber-tinted glasses at night, though it's people with mood disorders who need them most. Indeed, the most profound benefits of blocking blue light at night are seen in bipolar disorder. Small studies suggest that it helps unipolar depression as well, though the data is inconsistent.

### When to Wear Them

In order to get the best effects for sleep, clients should put these glasses on about two to three hours before bed. Although two to three hours is ideal, one hour or even 30 minutes may work and is likely to lead to better long-term adherence. Clients will get the best results by wearing them at a regular time, particularly if they have bipolar disorder.

During active mania or mixed states, clients can put them on earlier (around 6:00 p.m.) as in the dark therapy protocol (page 149). However, the glasses shouldn't be worn before 6:00 p.m., as that can flip the circadian rhythm the wrong way. That's a warning worth emphasizing, as some clients feel less anxious with the glasses and attempt to wear them during the day.

The glasses can be removed when the client is ready for bed, but the bedroom should be pitch dark. It's surprising how important that last part is. In one study, people who slept in dimly lit rooms had double the risk of depression over a two-year period compared to those who slept in complete darkness. The risk of depression rose with the intensity of light, but even five lux (equivalent to a night light) was enough to raise it (Obayashi et al., 2018).

Carefully controlled experiments with animals have arrived at the same conclusion. The health risks of blue-spectrum nocturnal light are so significant that controlled studies in humans are now considered unethical.

### Choosing a Pair

Strong blue light blockers (at least 90%) work best, but the market is crowded with products that don't rise to that standard. Uvex makes inexpensive glasses that work. The following two models were endorsed by mood researchers and *Consumer Reports*:

- Uvex S0360X Ultraspec 2000 in SCT Orange Lens (\$7 at Amazon). This model fits over regular glasses.
- Uvex 3S1933X Skyper in SCT Orange lens (\$7-11 at Amazon)

More stylish models with good blockage are available at [lowbluelights.com](http://lowbluelights.com) for around \$50. Opticians sell prescription versions with various levels of blue light blockage, but it's not clear if they block in the 90% range. Clients can test their lenses by looking at a rainbow image online. The blue portion should look gray or brown; if it looks blue, consider a different pair.

### Blocking Blue Light During Sleep

It's just as important to block out blue light while sleeping as it is before bed. The eyelids are translucent, and even low levels of light filter through and affect the brain. Blue light blocking glasses are uncomfortable to sleep with, so it's best to create a pitch-dark room for sleep. Popular ways to light-proof a bedroom include:

- Using blackout curtains
- Pressing aluminum foil against the windowpanes and attaching it with painter's tape
- Placing black electrical tape over any LED lights on electronic devices
- Purchasing a draft snake or using a rolled-up towel to cover the bottom of the door
- Sleeping in the basement
- Wearing a sleep mask (Note: Although this will work, it might prevent the mood-lifting benefits of a dawn simulator, which will be necessary if blackout curtains are blocking out the morning sun.)

## The Science of Blue Light

The eye has a special receptor called *melanopsin* that only responds to blue light. When blue light fades in the evening, this receptor raises melatonin, the hormone that regulates sleep. Melatonin also improves metabolism and aids repair of damaged cells, which is why blue light pollution is linked to so many physical health problems.

# Reducing Blue Light Exposure: Troubleshooting

## **“I can’t sleep in the dark.”**

Low-blue lightbulbs are safe for the brain and won’t interfere with melatonin. They give off an amber hue and are available as nightlights and regular bulbs. A good model is available at [lowbluelights.com](http://lowbluelights.com) for under \$10. Alternatively, search your favorite online retailer for “amber night light” or “blue-free night light.” The following are some effective models:

- Maxxima MLN-16 Amber LED Night Light
- SCS Nite-Nite Light Bulb
- SCS Lighting Sleep-Ready Light

## **“I can’t sleep without the TV on.”**

A lot of people use TV to drown out distractions or worry at night. There’s nothing wrong with that, except the blue light. Try podcasts, radio, or, even better, music, which has good evidence to improve sleep and mood when used at night (see page 151).

## **“The glasses aren’t comfortable.”**

It’s a good idea to start with the \$10 glasses, but if they work well you may want to upgrade to a more comfortable pair at [lowbluelights.com](http://lowbluelights.com) or [somniaight.com](http://somniaight.com) (around \$50).

## **“I don’t like to wear glasses.”**

The glasses themselves are not necessary. Rather, all that’s needed is to eliminate blue light. You could read in a very dark room with a low-blue bulb or a low-blue reading light. Bulbs that achieve this effect are listed above. Low-blue lamps are available at [somniaight.com](http://somniaight.com) and [lowbluelights.com](http://lowbluelights.com), or you can use the night mode on the PER2LED dawn simulator. Electronic devices will still pose a problem, but there are screen covers at [lowbluelights.com](http://lowbluelights.com) that can solve that.

## **“I don’t want people to see me in them.”**

These glasses help mood, but they are not just for people with mood disorders. Many professional sports teams wear them for their performance-enhancing effects. After all, they play better when they sleep better, and unlike steroids, there are no prohibitions against them. So many celebrities have taken them up that one journalist quipped about “celebrities trying to look cool by wearing blue-blocking lenses.”

## **“Can I use a similar pair of amber glasses?”**

Probably not. Most blue light-blocking glasses do not block enough light to improve sleep and mental health. Others were designed for entirely different purposes, like night driving, computer safety, or video gaming.

### **“Can I still use electronics at night if I wear blue blockers?”**

That depends on how energizing they are. If you *really* want to use them, that may mean they are too engaging and better saved for morning. Generally, it's best to keep electronics out of the bedroom, and definitely don't leave the TV running while you sleep. It will saturate the room with blue light. In contrast, a pitch-dark room deepens sleep, reduces depression, and improves weight loss. If sound is comforting while you fall asleep, try listening to mindfulness apps, sleep-inducing music, or a mellow audio program, like a podcast, old-timey radio show, or book on tape.

### **“Can't I just adjust the settings on my devices?”**

Most electronic devices have settings to reduce blue light in the evening (TV sets are an exception). There's *Night Mode* on iPhone, *Blue Shade* on the Kindle, and *Twilight* or *Blue Light Filter* apps on Android. For computers, there are free apps that do a good job, such as *F.Lux* for Windows ([justgetflux.com](http://justgetflux.com)) and *Candlelight* by Oliver Denman for Mac.

However, these settings do not filter out enough blue light or take care of the many other sources of this wavelength. To test them, turn the settings on and pull up an image with something blue, like a rainbow. Then, look at the screen through a strong pair of blue light blocking glasses. Do the blue stripes in the rainbow change when you put the glasses on? If they do, then the app is not blocking enough blue.

A good way to use these apps is to set them to turn on around 6:00–7:00 p.m. Start to dim the lights in your home around that time too, particularly the bright energy-efficient bulbs. Smart bulbs, such as Phillips Hue, can be programmed to dim and shift toward a warmer spectrum in the evening. Then, around 8:00–9:00 p.m., put on the blue light blocking glasses. This strategy is not as beautiful as the sunset over the Blue Ridge Mountains, but it will do.

### **“Can't I just take melatonin?”**

That's been tried, but it's not the same. Artificial melatonin does not improve mood and only adds, on average, 10 minutes to the total sleep time. Melatonin is just the end result of a complex process that's set in motion when the brain enters a dark room.

### **“I tried the glasses, but they didn't make me tired.”**

The glasses are better at deepening sleep than helping people fall asleep. You can still get the health benefits from the glasses even if they don't improve your sleep. For example, some studies have found that the glasses improved mental health even when people slept less while wearing them.

### **“Can I wear them while driving?”**

No. You won't be able to see clearly enough to drive safely with them. Remember, yellow and blue make green, so green stop lights look yellow when the blue is stripped away – and that's just the start of the problems.

### **“I feel calmer when I wear the glasses. Can I wear them during the day?”**

These amber glasses have a calming effect, but wearing them before 6:00 p.m. can cause depression. Physiologically, it would be like being in a pitch-dark room during the day. That's not a big deal for a few minutes, but too much of that can flip your biological clock in the wrong direction.

## Dark Therapy

Just as morning light helps depressive symptoms, evening darkness improves mania and mixed states. Light and darkness set the body's internal clock, and moods are better when that clock is running well. Timing is key here. Dark mornings and bright nights can both destabilize mood.

### A Famous Case

Mr. J 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 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m.). With this *dark therapy*, he improved so rapidly that they eased the schedule from 14 hours of darkness to 10 hours each night (10:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m.) (Wehr et al., 1998). He stayed well with that regimen, and so dark therapy was born.

### Dark Therapy the Easy Way

Traditional dark therapy requires total darkness. Even a distant street lamp or a brief flick of the bathroom lights can interfere with it. An easier approach is to wear amber glasses in the evening. Doing so creates a virtual darkness by blocking out blue spectrum light. This easy method works as well as the traditional way, as long as the client sleeps in a pitch-dark room. Indeed, dark therapy with amber glasses improved mania within one week in a randomized-controlled trial of hospitalized bipolar patients (Henriksen et al., 2016).

The glasses had a large effect in that study, about as large as what we see with medications. The method was simple: Participants either wore the glasses or stayed in a pitch-dark room from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. Although the glasses didn't make them sleep more (they actually slept less!), their sleep became more regular with this therapy.

Clients who have severe symptoms of bipolar mania or mixed states should start with a full 14 hours of darkness a day (6:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m.) and transition to 10 hours (10:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m.) as they start to recover. When transitioning, they should adjust by one hour every two nights (e.g., darkness at 7:00 p.m. for two nights, then 8:00 p.m. for two nights, until they reach 10:00 p.m.). If reducing the dark time makes their symptoms worse, just backtrack and increase their dark exposure by an hour. For milder symptoms, clients can start with 10 hours of darkness by wearing the glasses two hours before bed and then sleeping in a pitch-dark room for eight hours.

It's best to keep the lights down low while wearing blue light blocking glasses. It is also important that clients do not use dark therapy during the day. Remember: The idea is to set their biological clock, and daytime light helps with that. Although blue-blockers can cause vivid dreams and headaches, they are reasonable and safe to use in a therapy practice. I've included a helpful handout on the following page.

# Dark Therapy in Six Steps

- 1. Evening.** At 6:00 p.m., put on blue light blocking glasses. Wear them until you're ready for bed, and keep the lights down as low as you're comfortable with. Don't take the glasses off unless you're in a pitch-dark room. Pitch-dark means you can't see your hand in front of your face.
- 2. Sleep.** Get your bedroom pitch-dark using the techniques on page 146. When you're ready for bed, lay down in the pitch-dark room and take the glasses off.
- 3. Overnight.** If you get up at night and turn the lights on, make sure to wear the glasses. Otherwise, remain in your pitch-dark bedroom throughout the night, whether asleep or not.
- 4. Morning.** At 8:00 a.m., turn on the lights, or use a dawn simulator to wake up. Don't wear the glasses during the day.
- 5. As you improve.** Once your symptoms improve, you can put the glasses on later in the evening. Move the start time up by one hour every two days until you're wearing them two hours before bed.
- 6. Prevention.** Once recovered, keep wearing the glasses two hours before bed and sleep in a pitch-dark room. Doing so will help prevent bipolar episodes, as well as other health problems, like cancer, weight gain, and diabetes. The glasses also deepen sleep quality, which improves concentration the next day.

**Troubleshooting:** If you can't get the room pitch-dark, use a sleep mask. If you can't tolerate complete darkness, use a low-blue nightlight. If you're used to having the TV on in the bedroom, try music or podcasts instead. (A good sleep-inducing soundtrack is *Weightless* by Marconi Union.) Don't expect this therapy to make you sleep. Dark therapy gives your brain many of the healing properties of sleep even if you're wide awake all night.

**Bottom Line:** During dark therapy, you'll need to be in virtual darkness (with blue light blocking glasses) or pitch darkness for the entire evening.