

BLUE MONDAY TRANSCRIPT

Speaker: Wayne Elliott

Date: 4 January 2010

- 14:40 Lumie: [Happy New Year everyone! Don't forget to pre-register your questions ready for tonight's FINAL Blue Monday session with Wayne Elliott from the Met Office.](#)
- 16:32 Wayne Elliott, Met Office: Hello Weather affects much of how we live our lives, from our energy use, through dictating what we do with our leisure time to even how we spend our money in the supermarket. For many years it's been known that the environment affects our health and it's been said that we have lost the connect with nature to fully understand this relationship. Certainly, there are many who directly relate the seasons and the weather to their mood. Hopefully some aspects of this interesting area will come out in the discussion this evening.
- 18:55 Lumie: [Welcome to Blue Monday, Lumie's weekly online SAD clinic. Starting in five minutes, Wayne Elliot from the MET Office will be available to answer your questions on how the weather has an affect our health. PLEASE NOTE: This is our last Blue Monday SAD clinic – thank you for visiting us each week and asking lots of questions, we hope all our sessions have been interesting for you.](#)
- 18:57 Beverley: Hello, I wish you all a Happy and Healthy New Year Is the use of light therapy needed all year around. If not, when is the best time to decrease/stop and then to start again? Thank you
- 19:08 Wayne Elliott, Met Office: Hello Beverley. It depends on exactly how you're using the light therapy (bright light type or dawn simulation, see the FAQs elsewhere on the website to discover more on this), but from a weather perspective in the UK, the body does not get sufficient sunlight to produce Vitamin D from around mid-October until March. Therefore potentially, there is most benefit from using the bright light type of light therapy during the winter. Thereafter, so long as you're getting enough exposure to daylight, your body will begin to produce its own Vitamin D which should help people with SAD. Here at the Met Office we're with the NHS in piloting a service that prompts effective use of bright light therapy when the weather is gloomy for extended periods, this should help people prepare for these events. Regards, Wayne
- 19:08 Stacey: Hello Wayne, I suffer with SAD and every winter I inevitably think about moving somewhere hot and sunny! Would it really make any difference?
- 19:23 Wayne Elliott, Met Office: Hello Stacey. Where you live will dictate how much sunlight/sunshine you get and therefore the risk of getting SAD. This is the case even in the UK, where some parts of the country get quite a bit more sunshine than other areas. My understanding is that SAD is virtually unknown in tropical regions and much more common in places like Scandinavia, so the answer is yes, if you are able to move to sunnier parts during the UK winter, you are more likely to avoid SAD. Best wishes, Wayne.

- 19:24 marshmellow: How many hours a day/month/whatever do you need to combat depression? If I got a light box would I need to use it the same amount of time. Thanks.
- 19:33 Wayne Elliott, Met Office: Hello, if I understand your question correctly, the amount of sunshine you need is around 10-15 minutes a day at least 3 or 4 occasions a week through the months of March to October for the UK. It's also important to recognise that any sunscreen you have applied will block the UV! As for the light therapy, I'd refer you to the FAQs on the Lumie website as this gives some excellent advice on how to use the different types of therapy to help your particular situation and for how long. Basically it depends on whether you're using bright light or dawn simulation - I'll leave that to the light therapy experts. Hope that helps. Wayne
- 19:34 Sheila Mac: Hello. Is there a higher rate of depressive illness in places with fewer hours of daylight? It feels like there should be. I live up in the wilds of Scotland and it's as black as a cow's insides for half the year - very depressing!
- 19:40 Wayne Elliott, Met Office: Hello Sheila, I gather you've had a fair bit of snow up there? Yes you are correct in what you suggest, as I said in a previous answer, there is very little if any occurrences of SAD in tropical regions owing largely to the amount of sunlight/sunshine people are exposed to. The further toward the poles you go, the less light is available in the winter season. A Prof on Radio 4 last year, had researched this and was suggesting that a lot of ill-health/social problems in Scotland were linked to Vitamin D - obesity, alcoholism, diabetes, etc. Other features of the weather such as humidity are linked to mental health problems. In Alpine regions (mainly Austria), the Foehn wind is a very dry, warm wind that blows over the Alps from the South, it is linked to conditions such as migraines to psychosis. Wayne.
- 19:45 Neeta: Do you think you can 'bank' your exposure to sunlight? So if we have a really good summer (remember those :s) will my SAD be less severe that winter.
- 19:45 Wayne Elliott, Met Office: Hello Neeta. My understanding is that the beneficial effects of sunlight hitting the retinas at the back of your eyes are important but relatively short-lived. The exposure to unprotected skin for short periods builds an 'accumulation' of protection partly through the build-up of Vitamin D. Our indoor lives in modern society could be playing part in preventing people getting sufficient daylight through the non-winter months. Sunscreen is also probably affecting this issue - some people are very averse to having any unprotected skin exposed to the sunshine at all, even for short periods. Wayne
- 19:48 Steph: How do you think global warming and climate change will impact people's health?
- 19:53 Wayne Elliott, Met Office: Hi Steph. A heavy question indeed. My view on this is yes, climate change will impact on people's health, but on a whole range of time and geographic scales. Globally, already some areas are seeing swift degradation to their environment that is linked to global warming, particularly where it affects water availability and this does impact on human health very quickly. It's recognised that generally poorer countries/people

will pay a higher price when it comes to health. That said, even in the UK, many recent extreme weather events are consistent with what changes we expect to see - namely the 2003 and 2006 heatwaves and the flooding events in the Midlands and more recently Cumbria. The key weather events that impact on health in the UK are heatwaves, severe cold and flooding and it's highly likely that the frequency of these will change significantly in the future. Regards Wayne

- 19:55 Stacey: Is it the warmth or the brightness that makes us feel better I wonder!
- 19:56 Wayne Elliott, Met Office: This is not my area Stacey, but such a great question. I hope other Lumie experts can help more in due course, but my feelings are that it's both to some degree. The light on the retinas is important, the Vitamin D production in the skin also seems to be significant. The body is a complex things and the psychological benefit sof warmth of the skin must also play a big part. Wayne
- 19:56 Shelley: I moved to the UK from Argentina a couple of years ago and have now spent two consecutive winters here feeling dreadful. I have been reading up about SAD (seasonal affective disorder) so I'm pretty convinced that that's what it is (very withdrawn, can't be bothered with anything, sleeping loads more and being REALLY tearful). Could the move have triggered it? I have never been like this before I lived here.
- 19:58 Wayne Elliott, Met Office: Hello Shelley. I'm sorry to hear about the deterioration in your health as you describe. It's not appropriate for me to comment online really I feel, but there is a lot of help available and I hope you can find a way of helping the situation. Kind regards. Wayne
- 19:58 Neeta: Very important question, will we have a nice summer this year!?
- 20:01 Wayne Elliott, Met Office: It is important and I wish we knew the answer. The Met Office is leading the field in developing seasonal forecasts issued several months ahead, but as you'll probably remember from the BBQ summer forecast last year, they are experimental and do not have anywhere near the accuracy of short-range traditional weather forecasts. That said, we feel we need to continue to develop this area of forecasting - it will get much better as our understanding of what aspects drive the weather at this range. Wayne.
- 20:07 clivec: I was going to ask something along those lines Stacey. I'm not a beach person but every winter (I suffer with SAD big time) I try to go skiing. It's obviously not hot but it IS sunny and very bright and (for me, anyway) it seems to work just as well as a trip to the caribbean does for other SAD sufferers.
- 20:11 Lumie: [We're on the home straight now so if you have any questions for Wayne please get them in before 8:30!](#)
- 20:14 Wayne Elliott, Met Office: Hi Clive. I meant to pick up on this aspect earlier. I go to Finland with work quite often and the locals say very firmly that the snow makes such a difference. Recent winters (up to this one) have seen a lack of snow which has made the long dark hours seem worse for

many people. The snow, because it reflects any available light, helps. In skiing areas the light levels are tremendously high when the weather is bright or sunny. A similar effect can be noticed at the beach, the water and sand have high albedos, compared with green grass for example, meaning there is high reflection of the sun's UV light. Wayne

- 20:30 Lumie: Blue Monday has now come to an end for another week - we would just like to say thank you for taking the time to log-on - we hope it was interest to you. We also want to say a huge, big thank you to Wayne Elliot and all our other guest speakers for giving up their time to help answer everyone's questions. If you have any feedback on the Blue Monday clinic, we'd love to hear from you - please email lindsay@lumie.com.
- 20:30 Sad_gerry: As SAD is caused by a lack of light, does the Met office offer any sort of facility where by you can look up light readings outside, a bit like weather forecasts? This would be really helpful so that we can monitor when light levels are low.
- 20:30 Wayne Elliott, Met Office: Hi Gerry. There is indeed, 2 years ago NHS Cornwall did a review of the mental health services they delivered. Many responders to this suggested that the weather played a big part in how they felt. The Director there approached myself at the Met Office, knowing some of the work we did in health forecasting, and from that has sprung 'Brighter Outlook'. This is a service which is being piloted in 3 NHS regions this winter and which is hoped will be rolled out further rnext year. Bascially the service prompts people to use light and other therapy techniques ahead of periods of gloomy weather when the levels of naturally available sunlight are particularly low. So for example, if we're predicting 2 days of overcast weather for your area, you will receive an email or SMS alerting you of the fact in advance. Then you can use your Lumie light box, other self-help materials, take medication as prescribed, ensure you eat well, take exercise or whatever else you find helps to give yourself an improved chance of staying well. If you're interested, take a look at the Met Office website under metoffice/health. Wayne.
- 20:32 Lumie: Blue Monday really has finished now! Thanks Wayne for sneaking that last one in!