



ONLINE SHOPPER

# A Chill in the Air, and Ennui in My System

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The clock said morning.



Leslie Lamble

It was very dark.

The clock must be lying.

I can hear my husband, whistling as he shaves. What is wrong with him?

“It’s 6:30,” my husband called cheerfully.

He must be lying.

He threw open the curtains to reveal no light.

“We’re going to get soaked walking the dogs,” he said in the sort of enthusiastic tone that would be more appropriate for announcing a surprise trip to Paris. In springtime.

“You never used that hearty voice before we were married,” I said.

He clomped off happily to find his rain boots, leaving me to consider the day ahead. It is cold; it is gray; it is wet and it will be another 12 hours before I can start a fire and have a glass of wine.

Under these conditions, how can people stand to get out of bed, much less finish their holiday shopping?

Lots of other people in dark bedrooms are asking themselves the same question, but it gives me no comfort to know that as many as 14 million Americans experience full-blown cases of seasonal affective disorder at this time of year, with as many as 33 million more suffering from milder symptoms. We are the ones who may have less energy, more crankiness and annoyingly cheerful spouses.

We are the ones who drag ourselves to the computer in the morning and, waiting for the effects of the coffee to kick in, make a list of all the remaining things we need to do during the holiday season.

One day last week, my list said:

1. Back-ordered magic kit (check delivery status).

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## 2. Umbrella stand (buy).

Buying an umbrella stand was my husband's idea. He realized, after a few days of tripping over puddles in the entryway, that it may make sense to corral the dripping pile of umbrellas before hordes of guests started to arrive.

Whatever.

I scrutinized the list. At No. 3, it trailed off into lethargic doodling.

I wanted to care about the list. And I knew, vaguely, that I needed that magic kit — or to be more specific, that “award winning” \$49.99 Legends of Magic kit with “quality props to perform more than 200 illusions” — for a gift. On Dec. 10, I ordered it from [backtobasicstoys.com](http://backtobasicstoys.com), along with another item. Then its estimated availability date was Dec. 13. But, three days later, a “confirmation” e-mail message announced shipment of the rest of my order but made no mention of the magic kit.

I tried to get myself worked up as I went to [backtobasicstoys.com](http://backtobasicstoys.com) to double-check the description of the Legends of Magic kit. There, the fine print had changed in the days since I placed my order. It now said, “Expected Availability 12/22/06.”

Under typical circumstances, this would drive me crazy. After seven years of shopping almost exclusively online for holiday gifts, I have developed a low tolerance for glitches. But as I phoned customer service, I knew I was doing it more out of a sense of duty than because of any real urge to get to the bottom of the mess.

“We're getting 20 of the kits today,” the customer service representative said.

“The site says available Dec. 22,” I said.

“Maybe the 20 kits are all going to fill existing orders,” she said.

“Like mine?” I asked.

“Call tomorrow,” she said. “We'll know more.”

“O.K., thanks,” I said and hung up.

O.K., thanks? This was all I could muster? With this kind of an attitude, there was no way I could proceed to No. 2 on the list.

When it came to the weighty question of ordering an umbrella stand, I was in no condition to make an educated decision. At [bellacor.com](http://bellacor.com), the Symbolo stainless steel stand with a plastic insert (regularly price at \$78) looked fine. At [smithandhawken.com](http://smithandhawken.com), the small Bronze Leaf Bucket (regularly \$59) looked fine. Even an umbrella stand that was shaped (incongruously) like a pair of Wellington boots (\$179.95 at [victoriantradingco.com](http://victoriantradingco.com)) looked like a perfectly reasonable candidate.

What was wrong with me?

“Short days,” said Randy J. Nelson, a professor of psychology at the [Ohio State University](http://Ohio State University) Institute for Behavioral Medicine Research, whose studies of depression and anxiety in hamsters lend insight into how seasonal changes affect humans. “Here in Ohio, we're at about the same latitude as you, and the shortest day is about eight hours of light,” Dr. Nelson said. “Anywhere less than 11 hours is a short day.”

Short days lead to winter blues. Short days cause hamsters' brains to shrink. Short days impair their ability to remember and to learn.

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“Do hamsters ever get too listless to shop?” I asked.

“It’s tricky to measure mood in animals because they aren’t verbal,” Dr. Nelson said. “Most rodents tend to stay out of an open area during short days, and to stay on the periphery. If you gave a hamster Valium, it might venture out into the open.”

“Or white wine?” I asked.

“We haven’t tried that,” he said.

Many people treat themselves with bright light, particularly in the morning, sitting in front of a light box equipped with bulbs that emit 10,000 lux, like the seasonal affective disorder lamp from Uplift Technologies (\$199.99 at [Amazon.com](#)).

But doctors warn against self-treatment for some patients.

“If you have a mild sort of winter blues, it’s O.K. to use bright light on yourself,” said Dr. Carol E. Watkins, a psychiatrist in Baltimore who discusses seasonal affective disorder at [ncpamd.com](#). “But certain people should be cautious, like people with bipolar disorder. It can make them manic.”

In my case, Dr. Watkins said, I might feel better if I did the rest of my holiday shopping offline.

“It’s much more of a communal activity if you go out shopping and see other people,” she said. “Go shopping with a friend.”

“That might work for buying the umbrella stand,” I said. “But what about this magic kit that may never show up?”

“In a way, it’s a good thing,” Dr. Watkins said. “People get so many presents, all at Christmas, that they can’t appreciate them all. If the present comes a month later, that will make it unique.”

The next day it was still raining. I phoned Back to Basics Toys again.

“We are expecting more than 300 magic kits tomorrow,” the customer service representative said. “And you’re on the list. Phone Monday to make sure they came in.”

“O.K., thanks,” I said. Then I put on rain boots and went to the mall.

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