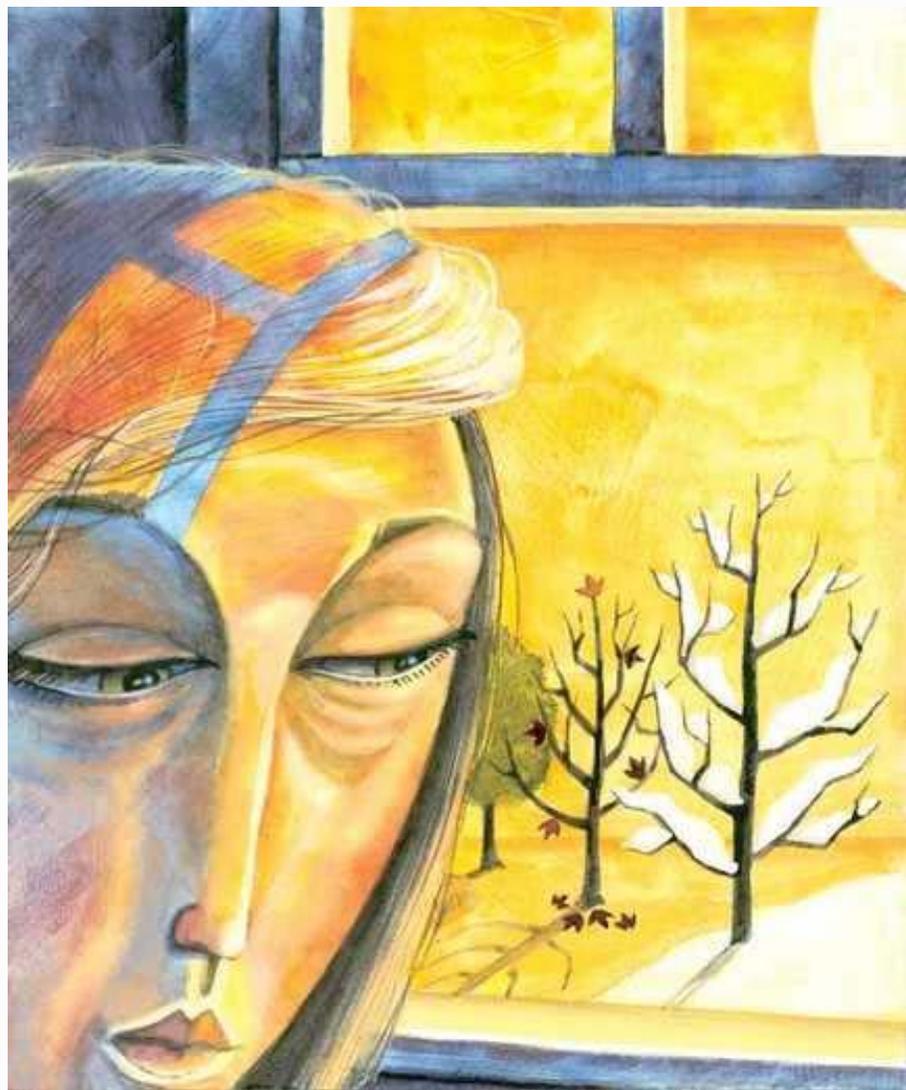


Light therapy can relieve symptoms of seasonal depression

By Angela Townsend, The Plain Dealer

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Kim Sherwin's recent two-and-a-half week trip to Europe, made partly to watch the Cleveland Orchestra performances in Vienna, Austria, was perfect except for one thing.

She forgot her portable light therapy device.

The contraption is what helps Sherwin endure the overcast, dark and dreary days from September through March.

Sherwin, 70, of Cleveland, suffers from seasonal affective disorder, or SAD.

SAD is a form of depression marked by its consistency of almost always occurring in late fall or early winter.

Finding the right light

At least a dozen companies sell a wide variety of light therapy products -- visors, alarm clocks, floor lamps, big light boxes -- even though the Food and Drug Administration has not approved their use to treat seasonal affective disorder. Here's some things you should know before buying.

What to look for

The decrease in sunlight, compounded by shifting the clock back one hour, can affect an individual's internal clock that regulates the sleep-wake rhythm.

And that, in turn, can do a number on energy levels. Symptoms include sleeping more than usual, eating more, particularly carbohydrates, and having an overall tendency to hibernate deeply.

For Sherwin, that meant staying in bed most days until afternoon.

"It just gets grimmer and grimmer, and I don't want to get out of bed," she said.

That's where light therapy comes in. Five years ago, Sherwin, who takes antidepressants for other forms of depression, started using light therapy every morning.

Light therapy is the best form of treatment for seasonal affective disorder, says Dr. George Tesar, chairman of the department of psychiatry and psychology at the Cleveland Clinic.

Light therapy is not about sitting in a room illuminated with regular or fluorescent bulbs.

Nor is it jetting off to a warm, sunny climate for a few days, although that might provide fleeting relief.

Rather, it's exposure to a special light with a particularly high intensity.

"Your eyes have to be open, and the back of your eyes need to see this light," Tesar said. "The light that hits your retina triggers the changes in the brain that result in a positive response that relieves the depression."

The light helps regulate one's internal alarm clock, or circadian rhythm. It also helps regulate melatonin, the sleep hormone, and serotonin, the chemical in the brain that helps relay signals from one area of the brain to another. Changes in serotonin levels can affect a host of things, such as mood, appetite, sleep and memory.

The best time for light therapy is first thing in the morning, for about 30 minutes a day. Most people start to notice subtle changes in the first couple of weeks. But "the moment you stop using it, the effects start to wear off," Tesar said.

Antidepressants (such as Wellbutrin, the only drug approved by the Food and Drug Administration for the specific treatment of SAD) are also available for more severe cases if light therapy isn't effective.

"It's best to avoid medication if you can," Tesar said. "But if other treatments don't work, it's shortsighted not to try medication. Sometimes that's the only thing to help re-regulate the chemical environment of the brain."

Experts also recommend reducing carbohydrate intake, exercising more, staying social and getting fresh air whenever you can.

Light therapy, which has not been approved by the FDA to treat seasonal affective disorder, isn't designed for everyone (extra caution is needed for people with pre-existing eye disease and certain mood disorders).

It's easy to order devices online or buy them in stores, but using them should be done under a doctor's supervision.

A good starting point for picking a product is to look for the unit of light intensity, or LUX. Special light therapy products often have 10,000 LUX, versus 500 LUX of a standard light bulb.

It's important that the product emit little or no ultraviolet light. Some newer products use blue light instead of the standard white light found in most light therapy boxes. Some research suggests that blue light is more effective at reducing SAD symptoms; however, the retina is much more sensitive to blue light than it is to white light and could be damaged if directly exposed.

Providers

Light box companies include **Philips** (1-866-832-4361); **BioBrite Inc.** (301-961-5940); **Full Spectrum Solutions** (1-888-574-7014); **Litebook Co.** (1-877-723-5483); Northern **Light Technologies** (1-800-263-0066); **SunBox Co.** (1-800-548-3968) and **Verilux** (1-800-454-4408).

Products typically range from \$150 to \$500, but it's possible to find lower prices at sites such as amazon.com.

Latest trends

"We have six different models, but our small portable ones seem to be very popular now," says Neal Owens, who founded SunBox in 1985. "A couple of our units are designed to look like true desk lamps. They're stealthy."

Since 2006, the Litebook Co. has sold what it calls the "new generation of light therapy." The Litebook Elite, like all of the company's other products, uses white LED. The difference is that the product is much more compact than traditional light therapy boxes.

And, unlike the other boxes, which require at least 30 minutes of exposure, the Litebook -- which has a targeted wavelength of light that mimics the sun's peak wavelength -

A couple of years ago, Sherwin stopped using a big light box and switched to a newer product the size of a compact disc holder.

Today, Sherwin eats breakfast and reads the newspaper while her Litebook sits off to the side, providing her light therapy for 30 minutes every morning.

"It just starts to grow on you," Sherwin said. "So many people complain about the problems they have, but I just don't think people know about these machines."

The Litebook Co. is collaborating with Harvard University, Yale University and universities in Canada and the Netherlands on a clinical trial that started last December to explore how the product can be most effective in treating SAD.

"People have always acted like broad spectrum light is important, but it's the pattern of light that's important," said Dr. Paul Desan, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Yale University who is coordinating the study.

Desan and his team are testing to see how the Litebook affects a person's circadian rhythm. "Right now, [no device] that has been developed has been approved by the FDA to treat seasonal affective disorder," Desan said. "We'd like to change that. We think this is the direction that the field is going in."

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- can be used for half that time, says company CEO Larry Pederson.

Check your insurance

Light therapy usually isn't an item that insurance companies uniformly cover, but it's worth checking with your provider; sometimes providing documentation of a SAD diagnosis from a physician is all you need.