

A Sunnier Side of Life

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When moving to Medicine Hat made Larry Pederson SAD, he fought back with light therapy

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Summary:

When moving to Medicine Hat made Larry Pederson SAD, he fought back with light therapy.

Body:

Larry Pederson couldn't have scripted his success much better. The southern Albertan was a screenwriter living in L.A. before returning to Medicine Hat in 1994 to be near his family. Within five years, his life took a major plot twist when he developed the Litebook, the first portable light therapy machine used to treat Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). But long before his happily ever-after tale of Hollywood-writer-turned-technology-entrepreneur, Pederson hit rock bottom. For him, that was lying on his parents' couch, almost catatonic, unable to even read the newspaper and contemplating suicide; a reality far removed from the breezy California lifestyle where his days usually began bright and early with a game of squash. "It felt like I was living in molasses, that everything was an effort," Pederson says. A psychiatrist diagnosed him with SAD, or seasonal affective disorder, a mood disorder related to low levels of serotonin, the "happy hormone" increased by wavelengths of sunlight often lacking throughout the winter months. It's estimated between two and six per cent of Canadians suffer from SAD, with many more coping with the less-severe winter blues. Once diagnosed, Pederson began light therapy, spending 30 minutes every day in front of a light box that mimicked the sun's rays, which provided the serotonin, and the boost of energy, he needed. An immediate change in Pederson's mood convinced him the treatment he had first dismissed as snake oil really did work. What he didn't accept was the design of the clunky unit, which, he says, "looked like something the Russians made in the '50s." He wanted something that was portable and reduced the stigma attached to SAD treatment. When he couldn't find it anywhere else, in 1999 Pederson came up with the idea for the Litebook himself. "I literally saw the whole thing. I wanted it to fit into my hand and my briefcase and look like a Sony Walkman," he says. Pederson tapped into the resources of the Defence Research Base in Suffield, 50 kilometres north of Medicine Hat, developed a scientific advisory board and, because money was tight, asked deans at the University of Calgary and Mount Royal College for their best students to help develop the first prototype and design its packaging. In 2001, Pederson took the Litebook to the American Psychiatric Association's conference, exposing 18,000 psychiatrists to the 12.5-by-15-centimetre box of glowing white LED lights. He then leveraged the influence of Canadian consulates who set up receptions with trade commissions and media. The Litebook Elite, the second version (which retails in Calgary for about \$200 and is shown sitting on the coffee table and on the wall on page 76.), is now sold in more than 50 countries. Pederson's company also sponsors research into the use of light therapy as treatment for major depression, weight gain and cancer-related fatigue. He still spends 15 to 30 minutes every day basking in the glow of his invention.

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