

# Features

## How important is light?

Free "Litebook" for use at the Wellness Centre

By Cindy Crossman

We spend the majority of our day working indoors with little or no bright light and then rush home to spend more time indoors to read, watch television, use the computer, listen to music, or exercise. Is this impacting our health? According to an article from the *International Journal of Risk & Safety in Medicine* (1998), the following are the common signs that may indicate that you may not be getting enough bright light in the beneficial wavelengths: Depressed Mood, Low Energy, Irritability, Difficulty Concentrating, Carbohydrate Cravings, Social Withdrawal, Reduced Libido, and Trouble Sleeping.

As the days get shorter, many individuals find that they begin to experience the "winter blues". We feel down and lose interest in things that we used to enjoy, have less energy, and find it difficult to wake up in the morning. When these feelings persist and affect the person's ability to accomplish simple daily tasks and performance at school and at work, a person may be suffering from something called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

According to the Merriam Webster medical dictionary, SAD is a medically recognized sub-type of major depression that tends to occur as the days grow shorter in the fall and winter. It is believed that affected persons react adversely to the decreasing amount of light and the colder temperature as autumn and winter progress. Research into the causes of SAD is ongoing. As yet, there is no confirmed cause. However, SAD is thought to be related to seasonal variations in light a "biological internal clock" in the brain regulates our circadian (daily) rhythms. This biological clock responds to changes in season, partly because of the differences in the length of the day.

### So how is SAD Treated?

According to the Mood disorders Society of Canada, many people with SAD respond well to exposure to bright, artificial light.

"Light therapy," which involves sitting beside a special fluorescent light box for several minutes day. A health care professional should be consulted before beginning light therapy. However, the use of anti-depressant medication and psychotherapy is also thought to provide beneficial results.

### How does the light therapy work?

Light therapy involves exposure to bright light of a particular spectrum. Specially designed Light therapy boxes or visors have been designed to treat SAD. It is recommended that 30 minutes of light exposure (if you have a box with 10,000 lux), and one hour (if you have a box with 5,000 lux) particularly in the morning, can have a positive benefit to lifting mood and energy. If it is effective, you should feel some relief within two to four weeks of initiating treatment. Treatment is usually continued throughout the winter period when symptoms are present. Some people with predictable episodes of SAD initiate treatment in advance of experiencing symptoms as a way of pre-empting the onset of depression. Research has proven the effectiveness in treating SAD with fluorescent light boxes in approximately 65% of cases.

The most common side effects of light therapy reported are: eye strain or visual disturbances, headache, agitation or feeling "wired", nausea, sweating and sedation. These side effects are generally mild and subside with time or by reducing the dose of light. Hypo mania and mania have also been reported as uncommon but serious side effects of light therapy.

Please consult your health care provider about the treatment and do not start light treatment without an accurate diagnosis by a trained clinician. It is extremely important to let your health care provider know if you are considering light therapy because exposure can cause severe reactions in people with certain medical conditions, like epilepsy, or with severe eye ailments like glaucoma, cataracts or retinopathy or if you are taking medication which increase photosensitivity before initiating treatment.

### What is the procedure for light therapy?

Light therapy for winter blues usually consists of 15 to 60 minutes of bright light every morning as early as possible upon waking – ideally before 8 AM. Find a routine that works best with your schedule. You may find it easiest to get your light while eating breakfast, exercising, applying makeup, or while working at the computer.

Some people find a second exposure of bright light in the middle of the afternoon gives them an extra boost of energy to make it through the day.

The Litebook should not be used in the evening as it could interfere with your normal sleep time. (there is an exception for 50-plus adults desiring to adjust their early sleep pattern)

Everyone is unique in their light needs; you may have to try different exposure times to find your best level.

### Where is this "light therapy" available on campus and how much does this cost?

The litebook is available at the Wellness Centre for all Mount Allison University students to utilize. No appointment is needed and there is no charge for the utilization of this treatment.

### General Usage Instructions of the Litebook

Position the Litebook approximately 12 to 24 inches (30-60 cm) from your face, and offset it to a 30 to 45 degree angle, like sunlight coming in a window.

Direct the Litebook's light beam at your eyes. Your eyes must be open to achieve the benefit.

To provide benefit, the Litebook's light beam is very bright, like the sun. As with the sun, you do not stare at the Litebook, although it is not harmful to glance at it occasionally.

Typically, you will know when you have received sufficient light. Most feel a sense of heightened alertness, energy, and/or mood.

For people who are more severely affected by SAD, counseling and sometimes medications may also be helpful for winter depression.

If you or someone you know suffers from SAD and/or who is interested in "lite therapy" please do not hesitate to contact the Wellness Centre at Mount Allison University at 364-2163 to meet with the Nurse/Educator or the Personal Counsellors.



A student takes advantage of the Wellness Centre's free