

Seasonal Affective Disorder

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Dark rainy days combined with less and less daylight equals more cases of seasonal affective disorder or SAD. But there's a new device offering relief to SAD sufferers.

A SAD sufferer from Calgary has invented the litebook, a form of treatment that provides those with SAD the natural light they are missing on a daily basis.

It may be gray outside but inside, Larry Pederson is basking in sunlight. It's coming from the little litebook.

"Its basically making up for the sunlight we are not receiving on a daily basis," says SAD sufferer Larry Pederson.

Getting enough sunlight is key for five percent of the population who, like Larry, suffer from SAD. SAD is a form of depression related to the lack of daylight in winter.

"As the days got shorter and we headed from summer into fall, I noticed that my mood and energy started to drop and my concentration went down. I got to the point where I was literally so depressed that I couldn't function," says Larry.

Larry used to rely on a large light box to treat his disorder, but he found it cumbersome and inconvenient. So, he invented the litebook. It takes up little space and can be easily transported.

"It turns out that white light admitting diodes we use in the litebook have the same exact wavelength as sunlight," says Larry.

"About two thirds of people with this condition get substantial relief from something as simple as exposure to bright light," says Dr. Raymond Lam, Head of the Mood Disorders Clinic at UBC.

One theory suggests that light helps stimulate neurotransmitters in the brain that affect mood and suppress melatonin. Melatonin is the hormone that makes you feel sleepy.

"The process is similar to what happens during jet lag when the internal clock is out of synch with the external clock. This leads to symptoms of fatigue, low mood, and problems sleeping. The bright light helps reset that clock," says Dr.

Lam.

It just takes thirty minutes a day of sitting in front of the light to help.

"I could feel my energy and mood coming back, says Larry.

Dr. Rhonda Low's additional comments:

Does going to tanning beds help treat SAD?

Tanning beds are not useful for two reasons. First, you need to shield your eyes in a tanning bed to avoid damage from the UV radiation. This prevents you from getting the light into your eyes that's needed for effect. Also tanning beds increase your risk of skin cancer and premature aging. That's why the older models of light boxes have special diffusing screens to block the harmful UV rays. This makes the litebook even more unique because it does not give off any UV rays. The overall energy is less than fluorescent lighting. Further trials are underway using the litebook at UBC and other centres in North America and Europe. The litebook costs about \$289 and is available at pharmacies such as London Drugs.

Are there any side effects from using light therapy?

Some folks can have a mild headache, eyestrain or nausea, or feel a bit edgy or wired. But these effects go away as you get used to the light exposure. However, you can reduce the amount of time spent in front of the light source.

What are other treatments for SAD?

The problem is usually worse in January after we've had many sunless days.

For those who find light therapy is not enough to help antidepressant medications and spending more time outdoors in the daylight and sitting near a window can help. This is one medical reason to have a winter vacation in a warm sunny place. The good news for those with SAD is you will get better when spring comes along.