

How Lightboxes can Help Students with Seasonal Affective Disorder

By Sophia Holt-Wilson for The Exponent

With Indiana's harsh winter temperatures and short days, this time of the year can be difficult for many students. Seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, is characterized by feelings of depression around fall and wintertime, and has a higher risk of affecting young adults.

According to the Mayo Clinic, the change of season and decrease in sunlight could cause seasonal depression by affecting the body's biological clock, or circadian rhythm. Lack of sunlight can also cause the body's serotonin and melatonin levels to drop, causing feelings of sadness and potential loss of sleep.

"I always get it around late in the fall semester and it gets hard over Christmas break," said Matthew Camino, a senior in the Polytechnic Institute. "When it's cold and there's no snow out, it's just depressing."

One way to prevent SAD is by using a lightbox for 15 to 20 minutes a day. This is called light therapy. [People who seek out light therapy] are often more depressed during the winter months and stop doing things they enjoy, according to Purdue Recreation and Wellness Programs Senior Assistant Director Tammy Loew.

According to Harvard Health Publishing, the light stimulates cells in the retina that connect to the hypothalamus, which controls circadian rhythm. With most lightboxes, ultraviolet light is filtered out as to prevent damage to the eyes or skin.

Lightboxes can be purchased on various online retail sites such as Amazon or Bed Bath and Beyond, and range in price anywhere from 39 to 150 dollars. Loew suggested that students consult a medical professional before choosing a lightbox for personal therapy.

Students can also take advantage of the free light therapy services at the Cordova Recreational Sports Center located in the Wellness suite.

“I’m not sure that [a lightbox] is something I would buy on my own,” Camino said. As far as Purdue’s light therapy services, he said he would have to give it a try.

Students are encouraged to begin with 10 to 15 minute sessions two to three times a week, and can work up to longer sessions. Benefits listed on the Wellness Center’s light therapy web page include potential to alleviate symptoms of SAD and other types of depression and sleep disorders. There are minimal side effects listed such as eyestrain or headaches that can be lessened by adjusting use. Students are encouraged to return consistently for best results, and it is most effective in the morning. Space can be reserved by calling 765-496-1788.