

LIVING

Shedding light on SAD

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CORRESPONDENT

There was a time when Chris Zavarce lacked the energy or the will to even pull himself out of bed.

"Every winter I would get very tired, would lack energy. I would require more sleep than usual, everything kind of slowed down," Zavarce says.

Each winter his life would grind to a virtual standstill to the point where, for two to three weeks at a time, he couldn't leave his room. He found it more and more difficult to complete daily tasks, to live a normal life.

"I lacked patience, I was unable to concentrate on what I was doing and my mood was down. It was a bad time," he says.

As his health continued to plunge each winter, his family relations deteriorated and his self-esteem dissolved. The 50-year-old Pefferlaw resident grew increasingly concerned about his condition. Then one evening, while watching a health special on TV, he finally recognized what was ailing him, which was later confirmed by his doctor — Seasonal Affective Disorder.

SAD is a crippling, drawn-out depression that afflicts 2 to 3 per cent of Canadians each winter. While many experience winter blues from time to time, people with SAD are unable to cope with the cold winter months and consequently hibernate throughout the season, eating and sleeping more, lacking motivation, energy and the ability to concentrate. They are plagued by feelings of self-doubt and shame and are seriously incapacitated in their social lives.

"It was very hard for my wife until we realized what was happening. But it was lucky that we found out in time, because if I was to continue with that route, I probably wouldn't have a family right now," he says.

While the exact root of the disorder is not certain, it has been observed that as days grow shorter and darker, a lack of exposure to sunlight can have negative effects on the biochemistry of some individuals and is thought to cause a decrease in the body's serotonin levels — the chemical responsible for contributing to a state of well-being.

"Most of the people have a lack of interest, there's just no motivation, the spark is gone," says Harold Goodman, chief of psychiatry at York Central Hospital.

In his 13 years treating SAD patients, Goodman estimates far more people have SAD to some degree than is realized. The common guess is around 10 per cent of the population suffers from a mild degree of the disorder.

"It's common, but it's treatable and treatments are acceptable and a lot of them are not drugs," Goodman says.

Zavarce began a search for alternative

treatments, and for a couple of years experimented with light therapy, which involves receiving 20 to 30 minutes of daily exposure to synthetic sunlight. But when this failed to restore his health, he started taking cues from the holistic movement by becoming a vegetarian, exercising regularly, taking vitamins, learning breathing techniques and embracing a positive outlook.

"With this approach it seems like I have it almost under control. I have the tools and the knowledge to fight it right away," he says.

Others have found success with light therapy.

Gail Vaughan, community relations director at the Canadian Mental Health Association, was diagnosed with SAD five years ago. Light therapy has managed to relieve most of her symptoms.

"I've found that the light has really helped me. In the winter, darkness pulls you down and I think that people that have this really hate winter," she says.

Vaughan's treatment also includes staying active and supplementing her diet with St. John's Wort, the herb hailed as an effective agent against anxiety and depression.

Light boxes and visors, sold at specialty

stores and through distributors, deliver up to 10,000 LUX of light, the equivalent to the intensity of sunrise, which is the recommended daily dosage for SAD sufferers.

"We know that light therapy works very nicely, in fact it works better than medication for SAD. For other types of depression it doesn't work, so it does suggest that light is the key thing for SAD," says Clark Institute psychiatrist Dr. Robert Levitan, who has treated SAD patients for the last six years.

However, light therapy has its limitations. It can be costly, with the average light box running \$300 and the visor reaching \$400. It also produces side effects in some people such as headaches and edginess.

Antidepressants such as Prozac and Zoloft, used to treat chronic depression, can be successful in treating SAD, and many find a combination of light therapy and medication work best. However, such medications have been known to diminish sex drive by up to 60 per cent.

While treatment is available, impediments remain to combating the disorder. Misdiagnosis is common with SAD because symptoms resemble other types of depression. There also remains a stigma attached

TREATING WINTER BLUES

Symptoms:

- oversleeping
- weight gain
- craving for carbohydrates
- lethargy and fatigue
- lack of motivation
- inability to concentrate
- low self-esteem
- less interest in social life

Help:

Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region
200 Davis Drive, Newmarket, ON, L3Y 2N4

(416) 798-8500; e-mail: cmhay@yesic.com

Mood Disorders Association of Metropolitan Toronto
40 Orchard View Blvd., Suite 222 Toronto, ON, M4R 1B9

(416) 486-8046; e-mail: mdat@sympatico.ca

Lights:

Health Light Inc. 1-888-385-4477

Northern Lights Technologies (416) 221-3535

Vital Aire (905) 855-0440

Study:

Dr. Robert Levitan, Clarke Institute of Psychiatry
(416) 979-2238; (416) 979-2221

for women in their 30s and 40s with SAD who have food cravings

to mental illness, which prevents many from admitting their condition to themselves and to others.

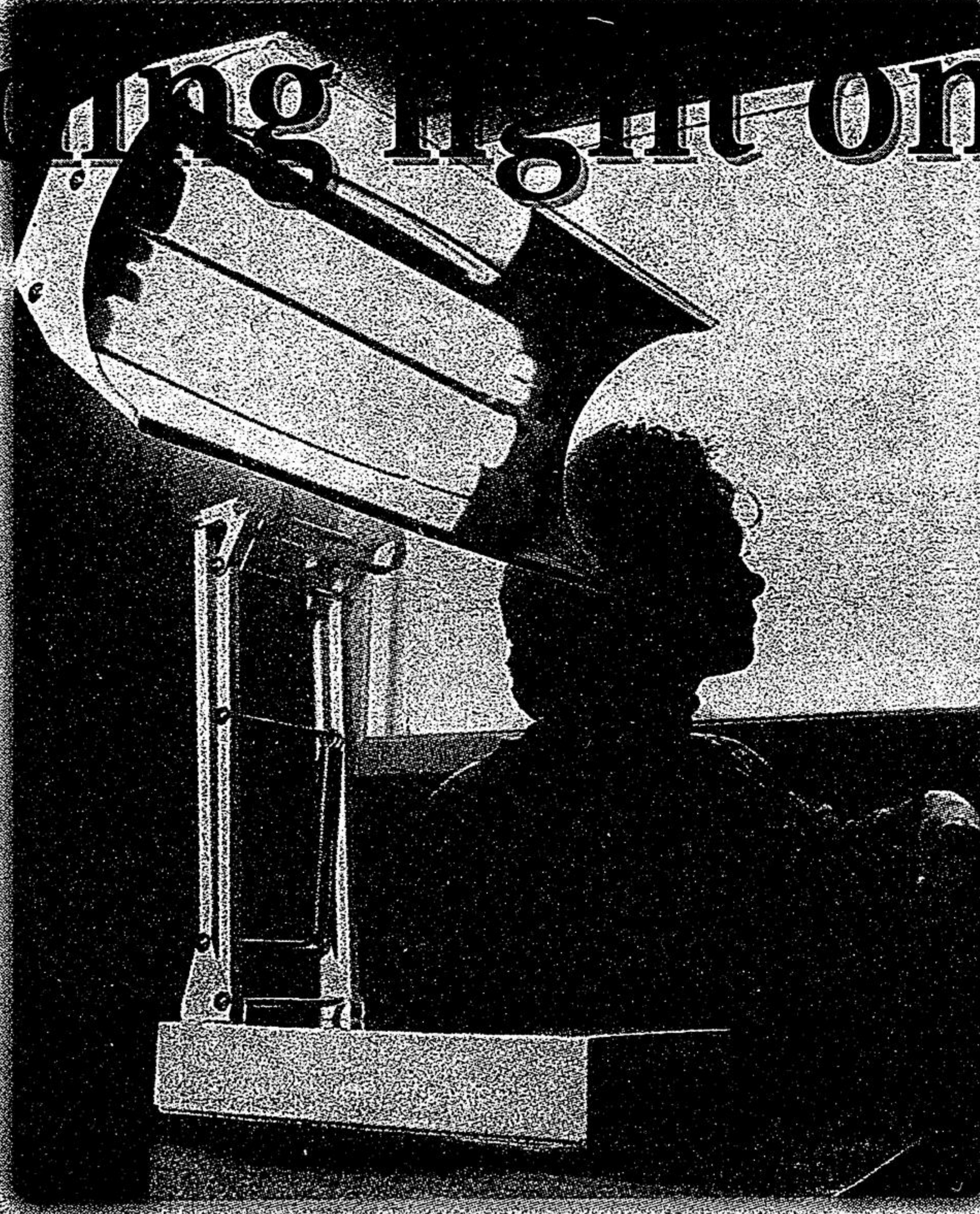
The CMA and the Mood Disorder Association of Toronto provide resources for people with mental illnesses and depression, including SAD. Both offer trial services of their light boxes, and the MDAT holds a SAD support group each month.

"When people are depressed they are in this sort of trough, they don't feel that there is any hope and so talking to people who have been there and are now feeling restored is very healing," MDA executive director Neasa Martin says.

Meanwhile, medical researchers continue to study the illness to understand why SAD strikes some and not others. Attitude is also thought to play a role in either worsening or improving the impact of the disorder.

As Zavarce knows, attitude is just as integral both to the healing process and to his overall self-improvement.

"I've learned how to react to it and prevent it from taking over. Not just for the purpose of SAD, but for being a better human being, for bettering myself. And with this program, I feel like I can do it."



TO ALL OUR PATIENTS: Dr. H. H. Walji and staff would like to sincerely apologize for some delays and rescheduled appointments this past week. We will be open for business as usual, weather permitting. Please don't hesitate to leave a telephone message.

Call Dr. H. H. Walji (Hons. BSc, MSc, OD, FIOS) Optometrist
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