

Feeling SAD? Swedish café has a bright idea

In a country that knows the winter blues all too well, an enlightening remedy is available: a dose of artificial sun

BY MARK SISSONS, STOCKHOLM

It's another bleak, overcast mid-winter day somewhere in Canada. You struggle to stay awake through the interminable hours at work, unable to shake that feeling of lethargy that seized you in November and won't let go until spring. Occasionally, you suffer an inexplicable pang of misery or guilt. On your worst days, you can barely drag yourself out of bed.

Martin Sylwan used to feel just like this. The Stockholm resident once dreaded the famously crepuscular Nordic winters, when darkness descends on Scandinavia for up to 19 hours a day. His glum feelings became so unbearable that he sought medical help and was diagnosed with Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, a type of winter depression caused by the shortening of daylight hours and the lack of sunlight in winter. According to the Mood Disorders Society of Canada, 2 to 4 per cent of Canadians suffer from SAD.

Sylwan's doctor prescribed light-therapy sessions at a hospital psychiatric ward — a relatively common treatment for SAD in Scandinavia. But Sylwan only went twice because he didn't like the feeling of being a patient.

"Light should be ubiquitous, something that you should be able to get ... together with good friends and a hearty, healthy breakfast," he says, explaining his concept behind Iglo Ljuscafe, which opened in October, 2004.

Each year from October until the end of March, Iglo lights up a tiny space on the ground floor of a commercial building in Stockholm's historic Södermalm district. The idea, Sylwan says, is to offer light therapy in a more casual and inviting environment than that of a sterile hospital or clinic. "I offer surrogate daylight in a positive atmosphere, in order to help people

keep their spirits up and better endure our long dark winters here in Sweden," he explains. "Somewhere people can come to relax, unwind and recharge over a latte, fresh juice, granola and a dose of artificial sunlight."

From the street, Iglo looks like your typical corner café.

But inside, it's more like the set of a low budget sci-fi movie, or some California cult's inner sanctum. The experience begins in Iglo's windowless "light room," which can seat a dozen people in big comfortable armchairs.

Painted completely white, the light room is swathed in a cocoon of white sheets draped over every surface. On the morning I visit, a half-dozen patrons are there, all wearing identical white Iglo gowns to prevent undue absorption into their clothing of the precious rays they are paying to consume.

Some chat quietly, others browse the morning papers. A man in the corner closes his eyes in blissful contemplation as artificial sunlight from lamps on the ceiling bathes the whole room in an incandescent glow. A delicious buffet of coffee, freshly squeezed juice, fruit and pastries is laid out.

Iglo isn't just some quirky outpatient ward, either. "You don't have to be diagnosed with SAD to visit. You can just come to cheer up," says Madelaine Sandgren, Sylwan's sole employee.

A former corporate recruiter, Sandgren used to feel so depressed in the winter that she would burst into tears several times a day.

"I just assumed that's just the way it was always going to be," she says as we sit chatting, resembling a pair of fallen angels. "But then I discovered what to do about my condition."

What Sandgren did was start hanging out with friends at Iglo several times a week.

"I actually got cravings, like with



CLAUDIO BRISCIANI/SCANPIX/AP

Stockholm's Iglo café, which operates only during winter months, offers customers beneficial light therapy along with coffees and pastries.

an addiction," she admits.

"Some physicians say coming to a place like Iglo Ljuscafe instead of dealing with the issue in more conventional ways is just perpetuating the problem. But I realized that all I needed was sunlight. So I started coming here, all those problems just went away, and it just felt great."

It felt even better when a friend persuaded Sandgren to quit the public-relations job she loathed and work for Sylwan instead. "I asked Martin if I could work here in exchange for hanging around enjoying free light and free coffee," she recalls.

"I did that for a while, but now he pays me."

Iglo is busiest during the morning rush hour, when Stockholmers on their way to work pop in to brighten their moods. On a typical day, about 40 people spend \$15 for an hour — the recommended exposure time — in the light. The breakfast buffet is \$8 extra. Most patrons are locals, although Sylwan says more and more tourists are dropping by, partly for the novelty and partly to remedy jet lag. Midday patrons tend to be students or retirees. Some companies even give their employees an hour or two of Iglo light as a Christmas

gift, or rent out the whole room in the morning for off-site meetings.

Closing time is mid-afternoon, with extended hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Iglo closes early, Sylwan explains, because he is concerned about people having difficulty sleeping if they get their energizing solar fix too late in the day.

Sylwan could probably franchise his luminous idea all over sun-starved Scandinavia. But he confesses that he isn't really a businessman, just a compassionate man. He also says his sense of responsibility to his regular customers prevents him from over-pro-

moting Iglo, lest it become overcrowded. "If it gets too busy, it's going to be hard for regulars to book an appointment," he explains. "Even now, we recommend calling ahead to book an hour."

Starting your winter workdays with a dose of sunlight and a hearty breakfast. Now there's a bright idea that just might appeal to the vitamin-D depleted inhabitants of this country.

For more information on Stockholm's Iglo Ljuscafe, visit www.iglo.se.

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