

NATUROPATHIC GUIDELINES FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Depression is a biochemical disorder – unbalanced brain chemicals cause distorted moods, thinking, and behaviour. According to the American Psychiatric Society, 80-90% of cases of depression can be effectively treated. Treatments may include medications, cognitive-behavioural therapy, dietary changes, and/or nutritional supplements. The naturopathic approach to depression focuses on identifying and treating the cause using a combination of dietary, lifestyle, and herbal/supplement recommendations.

POSSIBLE CAUSAL FACTORS

- Nutrient deficiencies - particularly vitamin B6, folate/folic acid, vitamin B12, thiamin (vitamin B1), iron, and/or vitamin C
- Excessive consumption of methylxanthines - methylxanthines are found in such foods as coffee, black tea, cola or chocolate
- Excessive consumption of simple sugars - this can trigger hypoglycemic reactions (i.e., low blood sugar levels) and result in depression
- Imbalance in brain nucleotides
- Hereditary - up to 50% of individuals suffering from recurrent episodes of depression have a parent who has also experienced depression
- Drug-induced - examples of drugs that can cause depression include oral contraceptives, alcohol, nicotine, cannabis, caffeine, corticosteroids, betablockers, and other anti-hypertensive medications
 - Oral contraceptives may lead to depression in a significant number of individuals because they create a vitamin B6 deficiency - in addition, they may deplete the body of folate, vitamin B1, vitamin C, and vitamin B2
 - Oral contraceptives may also cause serotonin levels to drop in the brain
- Hypothyroidism - low thyroid function is a very common cause of depression and should always be considered
- Food allergies or food sensitivities
- Heavy metal intoxication

DIETARY RECOMMENDATIONS

Foods have a significant influence on the brain's behaviour. A poor diet, especially one high in junk food, is a common cause of depression. The levels of brain chemicals (known as neurotransmitters) are controlled by what we eat. These neurotransmitters regulate our behaviour and are closely linked to our mood. One very important neurotransmitter is serotonin - serotonin plays a role in mood, sleep, and appetite. Low levels of serotonin may result from diets too high in simple sugars/ carbohydrates (e.g., white sugar, white flour, sweets, processed foods) and lead to depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbances. Diets high in complex carbohydrates (e.g., vegetables, whole grains, peas, and beans), on the other hand, help to increase serotonin levels and elevate mood.

Note: The substance that processes serotonin in the body is the amino acid tryptophan. By increasing tryptophan-containing foods (see below for examples), we can increase the amount of serotonin made in the brain.

Therapeutic Foods

- Foods high in essential fatty acids - including raw nuts, seeds, vegetable oils (safflower, walnut, sunflower), evening primrose oil, flaxseed oil, and black currant oil
 - Essential fatty acids are needed for normal brain function
- Foods rich in vitamin B6 – including 100% bran cereal, watermelon, bananas, avocado, chicken, turkey, tomato juice, rainbow trout, sunflower seeds, halibut, sweet potato, potato, tuna, broccoli, brown rice, pineapple juice, walnuts, oat bran, feta cheese, salmon, beans (e.g., chickpeas, kidney beans, lentils, lima beans, and pinto beans), millet and brown rice
- Foods high in tryptophan - including cottage cheese, turkey, tuna, salmon (wild), cashews, halibut, shrimp, oatmeal flakes, pork, avocado, wheat germ, eggs, collards, spinach, raisins, yogurt, chicken, sweet potato
- Liver cleansing foods - including beets, carrots, artichokes, lemons, parsnips, dandelion greens, watercress, and burdock root

In general, eat a diet that is high in raw fruits and vegetables, whole grains (e.g., brown rice, oats, millet), raw nuts, seeds, and legumes (e.g., chick peas, kidney beans, peas, lentils). Such a diet will ensure adequate amounts of complex carbohydrates to increase serotonin levels in the brain.

Beneficial Fresh Juices

- Carrot
- Carrot and spinach
- Carrot, beet, and cucumber
- Lemon juice in warm water

Foods to Avoid

- ***Foods containing tyramine if you are taking MAO inhibitors***
 - Such foods include yeast extracts & breads made with yeast, cheese (boursalt, camembert, cheddar, stilton, blue, brick, brie, gruyere, mozzarella, parmesan, romano, roquefort), bologna, herring (dried, salted & pickled), cod (dried, salted or pickled), pepperoni, salami, chocolate, caffeine, pineapple, plums, prunes, raisins, Chianti red wine and soy sauce
- ***Aspartame and other artificial sweeteners*** (e.g., NutraSweet, Equal)
 - Found in many diet sodas and sugar-free gums
 - Aspartame can block the formation of serotonin and cause headaches, insomnia, and depression in individuals who are already serotonin-deprived
- ***Any known or suspected food allergies or sensitivities***
- ***Alcohol, caffeine (including coffee and black tea), and processed foods***
 - Caffeine can play a strong role in depression for some individuals
 - Intake of caffeine should not exceed 150-200 mg per day - one cup of brewed coffee has 120-240mg and one cup of tea has 16-80mg of caffeine
- ***Hot sauces, spicy foods, rich foods, salty foods***
- ***Foods high in saturated fats*** - e.g., meat, hamburgers, french fries, or other fried foods
 - Such foods lead to sluggishness, slow thinking, fatigue, and eventually, poor circulation (esp. to the brain)
- ***Sugar and excessive amounts of simple carbohydrates*** - including "good" sweeteners such as honey, molasses, and fruit juice
 - These simple carbohydrates or sugars initially increase energy, but it is quickly followed by fatigue and depression
 - Sugar also depletes the body of B vitamins and magnesium, which are crucial to the production of serotonin
 - Note: Stevia (a concentrated natural sweetener derived from a South American shrub) is an acceptable substitute available at health food stores
- ***Wheat and foods containing wheat*** - wheat gluten has been linked to depressive disorders

LIFESTYLE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Exercise is essential in the treatment of depression
 - During exercise, the brain produces endorphins and enkephalins which can elevate mood
 - Exercise also causes a 200% increase in norepinephrine - one of the brain chemicals often low in depression
- Negative ions can be beneficial - e.g., burning of beeswax candles
- Use full spectrum lighting in the home and/or work environment
- Increase exposure to sunlight or bright lights
- Get plenty of rest
- Avoid, as much as possible, stressful situations
- Learn to recognize, and then to "reroute," negative thinking patterns - working with a cognitive-behavioural therapist can help to accomplish this goal

Sources of this information:

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