

HERBAL TREATMENT OF DEPRESSION

Q. When I split up with my girlfriend recently after 8 years together, my doctor diagnosed me with mild depression. She suggested anti-depressant pills but a friend said to try herbs first. What could help me?

A. I am sorry that you are going through a difficult time. It is a blow to your confidence and can feel like you are grieving. I think it is important to talk to someone sympathetic and not feel ashamed or embarrassed to let your feelings out. Friends and counsellors can be very useful at such times. I also advise you to keep busy and avoid relying on alcohol. Drinking too much has the after-effect of making you feel more depressed. Try to exercise more to increase the 'happy' chemicals in your brain and make sure you eat a balanced diet with plenty of B vitamins – porridge and oatcakes are good. Eat regularly to avoid low blood sugar with resulting mood swings and fatigue.

Herbs do generally take longer than chemical drugs to have an effect but be patient and they will both support and help your body and mind heal itself.

Herbal teas if drunk regularly can be uplifting and relaxing. Try Chamomile, Lemon Balm, Limeflower, Peppermint and Rosemary either on their own or combined, instead of coffee and ordinary tea. The famed herbalist, Culpeper, who lived in the middle ages, spoke highly of Lemon Balm saying, "It causeth the mind and heart to become merry and driveth away all troublesome cares and thoughts".

As a medical herbalist I prescribe several gentle but effective herbs depending on my patient's particular circumstances and medical history. Unlike a G.P. who has only a few minutes to see you, I typically spend at least an hour with each person on his or her first visit. I would usually combine 4 or more tinctures (an alcoholic preparation of herbs) in a prescription tailored to each person's needs. A very small amount of about a teaspoon is topped up with water and taken 2 or 3 times a day. For example, Valerian, Californian Poppy, Skullcap, Passionflower and Wild Lettuce might be used in a 'sleep mix'. Valerian's name comes from the Latin meaning 'to be strong' Verbena, Motherwort, Damiana, Lavender, Sage and Borage can all help in depression. Borage has traditionally been associated with bringing courage.

Many people know the herb St. John's Wort as an anti-depressant due to the great deal of modern research, as well as to the traditional evidence,

for its effectiveness. In Germany doctors prescribe it but it should not be used alongside chemical anti-depressants and certain other drugs. If I decided it was the right herb for a patient, I would add it to a prescription with some of the herbs already mentioned and perhaps along with liver protecting herbs such as Milk Thistle. Many herbalists believe that proper liver function plays a vital role in cases of depression because the liver processes hormones and toxins circulating in the body, which affect brain chemistry and mood.

A few words of caution: -

It is advisable to consult a qualified herbalist before taking herbs especially if you are pregnant, breast-feeding or on medication.

Moira Ross, medical herbalist.
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