

HERBAL TREATMENT OF DEPRESSION

Q. How would you, as a medical herbalist, treat someone for depression?

A.

5 million people in the UK at any one time suffer from depression. 12 million people in the UK use anti-depressants.

Depression is mainly due to adverse circumstances in vulnerable people, to a medical condition or to drugs (prescription or otherwise).

Every consultation I have with a patient starts with a detailed case history. I listen carefully to what the person has to say. It is important to try to discover the cause of the depression and a process of elimination can often achieve this. Only then will I feel confident that I am using the correct herbs in formulating a personal prescription for my patient.

There are several possible medical conditions, where depression is a symptom. I rule out any physical illness being the underlying cause by questioning and physical examination and referral for any necessary specialist tests, usually to the person's G.P. and always with the patient's consent. Depression can be a side effect of some prescription drugs such as steroids, oral contraceptives, interferon, reserpine, and phenothiazines.

To inquire deeply into a patient's social history and lifestyle, I have to be tactful and it can take more than one visit. For example, there may be alcohol or "recreational" drug abuse or sexual abuse, unemployment, high stress levels, loneliness, or some underlying feelings of grief due to death of someone close or a failed relationship.

I note the patient's diet and consider possible nutritional deficiencies, food allergies or Candida.

My treatment plan will be discussed with the patient to make sure she/he is happy with it. I do not suggest too much in the way of lifestyle and dietary changes at first so as not to overwhelm someone who is feeling vulnerable.

The main strategies are to: -

- Improve appetite and digestion.

Often bitter tasting herbs are useful. Examples are Yellow Gentian, Dandelion and Vervain.

- Improve sleep.

Herb examples are relaxing herbs such as Linden Blossom, Valerian, Passion Flower, Cramp Bark, Californian Poppy and Chamomile.

- Improve mood.

Herbs used might be St. John's Wort, for its beneficial effect on serotonin (sometimes known as the 'feel good' chemical) levels in the brain, Lemon Balm, especially in Seasonal Affective Disorder, Damiana, particularly in post-menopausal depression, Oats, to provide more B vitamins which can be depleted in alcoholics, Borage, for adrenal gland depletion when there are high stress levels, Rosemary and Ginkgo, to help memory affected by, for example, Alzheimer's disease.

I will blend the herbs I have chosen and the patient takes them usually for 2 weeks, before returning for a follow-up consultation. The prescription is then adjusted as necessary depending on the patient's progress. Herbs are taken in the form of teas, tinctures, capsules/tablets, fresh plant juices, aromatic waters, essential oils or a mixture of any of these. I may sometimes add Bach flower remedies. The herbs I use are organically produced where possible.

I am careful to be aware of any possible contra-indications or herb/drug interactions.

It is advisable to consult a medical herbalist before taking herbs.

Moira Ross
December 2009