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## Natural Treatments for Depression

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Although most adults and children can experience a passing sense of “feeling blue” from time to time, depression can stop a person from living a normal life. People who are depressed cannot just “snap out of it.” This illness interferes with the ability to work, study, sleep, eat, and enjoy once pleasurable activities and can devastate the lives of concerned family and friends. Depression affects up to 9.5% of the U. S. population. Fortunately, depression is a treatable illness and natural modalities such as naturopathic medicine and Chinese medicine can play important roles in the healing process.

Children, like adults, also experience depression: 2.5 percent of children and up to 8.3 percent of adolescents suffer with the illness. Only recently has the medical community recognized the need to learn more about a child’s symptoms and various treatment methods. The depressed child may fake sickness, refuse to go to school, be clingy, or worry that the parent may die. Older children may sulk, get into trouble, be negative, grouchy, and feel misunderstood. According to Dr. Wendy Weber, adjunct clinical faculty at the Bastyr Center for Natural Health, and principal investigator on the study of St. John’s Wort for Juvenile Depression, “the child may seem withdrawn or less interested in activities that used to be enjoyable. Parents may notice sleeping problems or a weight change. Any talk about death or thinking that things would be better if they were not here is a definite red flag.” Because normal behaviors vary from one childhood stage to another, it can be difficult to tell whether a child is just going through a temporary “phase” or is suffering from depression. Dr. Weber states that “The important thing is for parents to recognize what the symptoms are and to seek out treatment for their child.”

Although many people experience depression, naturopathic physicians believe the causes are unique to each individual and that it is important to treat the person and not just the disease. Naturopathic physicians will sit down with a patient to learn in detail how this condition started and what the person experiences. Life events such as a family death, relationship issues, or stressful conditions can trigger depressive symptoms. Environmental toxicities, deficiencies of nutrients such as B vitamins and folic acid, fatty acids, and/or specific amino acids can cause symptoms. Underlying physical problems such as thyroid conditions, anemia, or hormonal imbalances can significantly alter a person’s mood and these can be diagnosed by physical evaluation, proper laboratory tests, and a complete patient history.

Naturopathic physicians have found that optimizing basic health factors such as sleep, diet and exercise can often prevent or significantly minimize the tendency towards depression. Carefully choosing an approach that can help uncover and treat psychological factors such as biofeedback, talk therapies, or energetic medicines along with patient-specific changes in lifestyle, and specific nutritive and botanical medicines can often resolve symptoms without antidepressant medications. Therapies for children may include diet changes, including supplementing with fatty acids, nutrients, botanicals and homeopathy.

Naturopathic approaches may also be used in conjunction with a conventional medical doctor’s antidepressant medications. Although these medications are known to commonly have side effects, there are important instances where antidepressants can prevent suicide attempts or help a person function so they are able to care for children or work to support a family. It is important that once a patient begins antidepressant medications, he or she should not stop taking these without consulting their doctor for instructions on how to discontinue safely. Additionally, it is important that they check with their naturopathic

physician regarding the use of any supplement or herbs for these may interact with their medications.

Traditional Chinese medicine has been used for over two thousand years to treat emotional conditions and is quite effective for depression. Chinese medicine philosophy views the shen or “spirit” as being intimately related with the movement of qi or vital energy in the body. Various patterns of depression for different people may be related to the Chinese perspective of organs such as the heart, which energetically affects emotions. Also important is the way our body regulates nourishment, for a depressed mood can adversely affect the stomach and spleen, which will decrease the nourishment of our bodies and mind, thus causing further disturbance. Acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine, and food choices according to the Chinese tradition can help restore balance and replenish our bodies to regain normal mood patterns.

Depression is a multi-faceted illness affecting both adults and children alike. This condition is well-treated using naturopathic and Chinese medicine. Natural medicine practitioners define specific causes for childhood and adult mood disturbances, and treat these accordingly by addressing the cause, restoring optimal health balance, and complementing drug therapy when necessary.

Symptoms for Juvenile Depression:

- At least 2 weeks of feeling depressed or down nearly every day
- Or 2 weeks of being less interested in activities with symptoms of increase or decrease of appetite
- Sleep disturbance (too much or too little)
- Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating
- Restlessness or moving more slowly
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide

Note: to learn more about safer non-drug methods to treat childhood depression Dr. Weber is currently accepting children for a clinical trial of an herbal botanical medication. You can learn more about having your child participate by calling the Bastyr Center for Natural Health at 206-834-4137.

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