

Herbs for Nerves:

Anxiety, Insomnia and Depression

By Howard Woodwind Morningstar, MD

Our minds are how we identify ourselves as individuals. The mind appears to reside in the central part of the nervous system we call the brain. Here, we filter and process sensory information about the external world and our physical bodies, creating experience. Here we determine how we respond to experience, that is, how we behave. Here we connect to our bodies and to each other, to Gaia and to the divine.

The human brain is an intricate community of living cells, called neurons. Neurons communicate with each other and with organs throughout the body by secreting a variety of neuro-transmitter chemicals at many trillions of connecting junctions, called synapses. Each type of neurotransmitter stimulates, blocks or otherwise modifies the activity of other neurons. The balance of neurotransmitters active at any given moment is the physical basis of our thoughts and feelings, our memories and dreams.

The brain's community of neurons is dynamic, constantly changing in response to stimuli. This is the basis of all learning. Hence experience, that is, the brain's interpretation of events, depends upon past experiences, which have influenced its structure, as well as our current "state of mind", which determines the balance of active neurotransmitters.

When our physical and mental energies flow in harmony with the greater whole, we interpret novel events as interesting or challenging, rather than threatening. In this balanced state stress becomes a teacher that guides one towards growth.

Anxiety occurs when we are uncomfortable with the greater flow. This is a useful response to dangerous circumstances, as in the rush of adrenaline that helps us get out of harm's way. However, chronic stress causes the brain to produce an excess of adrenaline and other neurotransmitters that provoke the experience of anxiety from even ordinary events. Anxiety disorder can also result from a single overwhelming psychic trauma and a variety of medical illnesses or sensitivities to toxins, medications and foods. Whatever the cause, like a neglected pasture filled with brambles, the anxious person's experience of life is thorny and painful.

When anxiety becomes established in the brain's architecture, each new event is interpreted as a threat or burden to the already overwhelmed individual. A vicious cycle results, with increasing mental disability and loss of livelihood, friends and family.

Through the brain's communication with the rest of the physical body, anxiety can create almost any symptom and worsen physical illnesses. It has detrimental effects on blood pressure, heart disease, asthma, allergies, skin problems such as eczema and hives, digestive ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome and on menstrual and adrenal problems. The wise healer will include

treatment of anxiety when caring for these problems.

Insomnia occurs when anxiety interferes with one's ability to surrender and lose the self in sleep. It's often related to disruptions in the daily cyclic production of the hormone melatonin. Since sleep is a universal healer, it is impossible to function optimally and creatively unless one sleeps well and wakes up feeling rested.

Depression can have many causes, including unresolved loss, hormonal imbalances, hidden medical illness, food and environmental sensitivities, heavy metals and other toxins and chronic infections. It can be an effect of prescription drugs, especially oral contraceptives, steroids, and some heart medicines. At the biochemical level, depression is associated with reduced brain levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin.

Depression often enters a vicious cycle, with sadness reinforcing sadness until one feels hopeless and overwhelmed. If untreated, it can lead to weakened immunity and premature death from infections, cancer, suicide and accidents. Its symptoms include fatigue, loss of interest in life, excess use of alcohol and other mood altering drugs, sleep disturbances, feelings of hopelessness or inadequacy and thoughts of suicide. Depression is often closely linked to insomnia, anxiety, fibromyalgia and chronic pain syndrome.

As in all healing endeavors, proper treatment of anxiety, insomnia or depression means uncovering the roots of the problem, and then restoring balance. As always, the simplest medicines are often the most powerful.

For example, when you feel separated from Gaia's whole it's easier to become lost in anxiety or depression. Any spiritual path that restores awareness of your connection to the divine will heal this. It's also important to be in a safe and nurturing environment. Since the beauty of nature is healing, surround yourself with beauty whenever possible.

Other effective healing modalities for both anxiety and depression include the love and support of understanding people and opportunities to talk about your feelings. Physical exercise, massage, meditation, deep breathing and other relaxation techniques, as well as healing music and rituals can be very helpful. Many find that acts of service that give energy back to the earth and to others are extraordinarily healing.

Nerve tonics such as whole oats and a diet based on whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, fish and vegetarian proteins nourish the nervous system. If you suspect food sensitivities try an elimination diet while keeping a food and symptom diary. Avoid caffeine, refined sugars, alcohol and certain artificial food additives, as these can increase brain levels of anxiety-provoking neurotransmitters. Low levels of B vitamins, zinc, chromium and magnesium have a similar effect, so supplementing the diet with these can help. Supplement the diet with antioxidant nutrients and herbs such as Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*) and Milk Thistle (*Silybum marianum*) as well as adaptogenic herbs such as Siberian Ginseng (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*), which help

alleviate the effects of stress.

Herbal “nervines” that help one relax work best as part of a comprehensive approach to anxiety. Useful nervines include Chamomile (*Anthemis nobilis* & *Matricaria chamomilla*), Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*), Skullcap (*Scutellaria laterifolia*), Black Cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*), Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*), Hops (*Humulus lupulus*) and Kava (*Piper methysticum*). Avoid using wildcrafted Lady's Slipper (*Cypripedium pubescens*), as this beautiful nervine orchid has sadly been over harvested and is now endangered. Our healing must not come at mother nature's expense.

Successful treatment of insomnia depends on relieving associated anxiety and establishing regular sleep habits. Get to bed at a regular hour, and sleep in a dark, quiet and safe place. Establish comforting bedtime rituals such as a candlelit Lavender (*Lavendula officinalis*) bath followed by a warm cup of Chamomile tea with milk. Relaxing music, guided visualizations and satisfying sexual activity are often effective sleep aids. Avoid evening television, with its loud commercials, shoot-outs and upsetting news.

If you can't sleep, read, listen to music, or write in a journal instead of tossing and turning. Rise up early in the morning, avoid napping during the day, and try again the next night. Insomnia is often worsened by evening consumption of foods and drugs that increase brain levels of stimulant neurotransmitters. For example, fermented foods such as cheese, cured meats and sauerkraut are high in the amino acid tyramine, easily converted to adrenaline. Caffeine, nicotine, decongestants and stimulant herbs such as Ephedra (*Ephedra sinica*) also interfere with sleep.

On the other hand, the amino acid tryptophan is readily converted to serotonin, a neurotransmitter that promotes a feeling of well-being, aiding sleep. Tryptophan, currently banned by the FDA as a supplement, increases serotonin levels, helping both anxiety and depression. If you can't sleep, choose foods high in tryptophan, including turkey, salmon, figs, dates, bananas and milk. Supplementation with the hormone melatonin about one hour before bedtime will often promote a restful sleep.

Herbal medicines especially helpful for insomnia include Passion Flower (*Passiflora incarnata*) and Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*). A bedtime tea of Chamomile, Catnip (*Nepeta cataria*), Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*) & Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense*) is effective and safe even for young children.

When dealing with depression, search for and correct its root causes. While doing so, there are many healing modalities that can help. Regular exercise increases mood elevating brain endorphins, so try a daily vigorous walk in a beautiful place. Sunlight is especially helpful for those who suffer from seasonal depression in the dark winter months. Always find what connects you to others, to mother earth and to the divine, as ultimately, healing depression involves becoming found, not lost.

It's important to correct nutritional deficiencies and eliminate toxins and food sensitivities. Pyridoxine (one of the B vitamins) deficiency depletes serotonin levels, worsening depression. So can frequent use of caffeine, refined sugars and alcohol. Supplementation with B vitamins, vitamin C, folic acid, calcium, magnesium and herbs rich in trace minerals such as Nettles (*Urtica dioica*) is often helpful, as are antioxidants, such as vitamin E and Flax seed oil.

The amino acid tyrosine increases levels of the energizing neurotransmitters adrenaline and dopamine. Tyrosine must be avoided if you are taking prescription "MAO" inhibitor antidepressants or if you have cyclic "manic-depressive" mood swings.

Herbs that stimulate liver function, such as Red Clover, Burdock (*Arctium lappa*), and Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) help the body eliminate toxins, and are often helpful, as are stimulant tonic herbs such as Ginseng (*Panax ginseng*), Rosemary (*Rosemarinus officinalis*), Lavender and Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*).

Specific herbs most useful for depression will depend on its cause. St. John's Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) increases brain levels of dopamine and other energizing neurotransmitters. Licorice root (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) increases production of adrenal stimulating hormones, useful if adrenal exhaustion is present. Avoid licorice if you have high blood pressure, fluid retention or are pregnant. Black Cohosh is indicated for depression associated with hormonal mood swings, while Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*) may help when poor circulation or chronic inflammation are problems.

Finally, our cultural epidemics of anxiety and depression can be seen as Gaia's cries for help expressed through the emotions of sensitive individuals. We are experiencing the destruction of our beloved planet's life sustaining environment, endless cycles of war and the constant threat of annihilation. Many of us have become accustomed to circumstances that are beyond normal comprehension. But everyone has a limit to what they can filter out. What we diagnose as anxiety or depression may be a sensible response to these insane circumstances.

These messages, although painful, must provoke growth and change if we are to survive. Healing needs to be a total process, enfolding the individual, community, civilization, and planet.

May it be so!

This overview is presented for educational purposes only. For herbal advice regarding specific health conditions consult a qualified health care professional.

This article originally appeared in ***Sentient Times***.

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