



BITTER PILLS

With an increasing number of Americans popping multiple meds to treat depression, Ginny Graves wonders: Could food be a natural alternative?

Tucked away on a quiet side street in bohemian-chic Mill Valley, California, lies a 23-year-old nutrition clinic that's become a mecca of sorts for those suffering from depression. Originally created to treat eating disorders and addictions with a tailored combination of supplements, the discreetly named Recovery Systems Clinic began seeing a shift in its clientele in the last decade or so. "Now about 80 percent of my patients are either depressed or, more commonly, trying to get off depression medications," says the clinic's executive director, psychologist Julia Ross, M.A.

Antidepressants—the most frequently prescribed drugs for those from 20 to 59—can be a "helpful tool," acknowledges Ross. "The trouble is, they don't cure anything, so when you go off them you risk becoming depressed again." Ross says that because nutrient therapy targets the underlying problem, it can keep people off medication for good—a promise that holds increasing appeal, since most patients are on more than one psychiatric drug.

The Prozac Nation has gone Prozac-Plus. Over the years, doctors have discovered that a single drug often isn't enough to fully brighten moods (and even if it is, the pills can create other

BRAIN OVERLOAD
WHEN IT COMES TO PSYCHIATRIC DRUGS, MORE IS NOT NECESSARILY BETTER.

problems—obliterating sex drive, say, or the ability to sleep), so many now add a second medication to augment the first, plus a little something to improve sleep or lift libido. People with particularly hard-to-treat illnesses can wind up with half a dozen prescriptions, according to Ramin Mojtabai, M.D., Ph.D., associate professor at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. He coauthored a 2010 study that found that doctors prescribe two or more meds during a single office visit 60 percent of the time—up nearly 20 percent from a decade ago—a revelation that cast a spotlight for the first time on the trend toward prescribing multiple drugs.

There's no doubt that meds are helpful and necessary for many; they're especially effective in combination with psychotherapy. But there's growing concern that in the quest to banish depression, we've gone overboard.

"If you asked 100 psychiatrists whether it's good practice to have patients on three or four meds, they'd all say no," says Daniel Carlat, M.D., associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Tufts University School of Medicine and author of *Unhinged: The Trouble with Psychiatry—A Doctor's Revelations about a Profession in Crisis*. "The scientific evidence in favor of using multiple drugs is sparse." At the same time, the risks are becoming clearer. Most seriously, combining meds can cause diabetes, high cholesterol, and colossal weight gain (40 to 60 pounds isn't unusual). It can also churn up the mind or dull it down, and some people develop a tolerance, needing higher and higher doses. As important, many people in our ever-more-holistic culture are wary of staying on medication, much less multiple meds, for the rest of their lives.

But stopping antidepressants (a joint decision that needs to be made by patient and doctor) can be perilous in itself, causing everything from flulike aches and nausea to electric-shock sensations. And the more meds you're on, the trickier it can be to get off. Which explains the growing interest in finding a kinder cure. Could nutrients be a substitute for pharmaceuticals?

Across the country from Ross's clinic, at the National Center for Whole Psychiatry, in Chevy Chase, *health* >235

Maryland, Robert Hedaya, M.D., uses a similar nutritioncentric approach. Hedaya, certified in psychopharmacology, says he uses medication as a first-line treatment for new patients with depression only “when absolutely necessary”—with someone who’s suicidal or acutely psychotic. For everyone else, he tests for—and treats—nutrition deficiencies, hormone disorders, and even allergies, all of which can affect state of mind.

According to proponents of the food-as-antidepressant theory, deficiencies in certain nutrients are responsible for the current epidemic of low mood. Without sufficient quantities of certain amino acids, such as tyrosine and 5-HTP or its cousin tryptophan, for instance, the body can’t manufacture serotonin and dopamine, the brain’s key mood-boosting neurotransmitters that are the target of most antidepressants. (Researchers at the National Institutes of Health found that short-term tryptophan depletion can induce a minor relapse of depression.) A well-balanced brain also requires zinc, to enhance the receptors’ ability to interact with neurotransmitters; vitamins B6 and B12, which help maintain healthy nerve cells; and essential fatty acids, like omega-3s, to keep the brain, composed primarily of fat, functioning properly.

Skeptics who remember the promises about vitamin E’s preventing heart disease are undoubtedly dubious. But studies suggest the nutrient fix could work. Last year, Canadian researchers reported that depressed patients taking 1,200 milligrams of fish oil a day had about the same level of relief they’d likely get from antidepressants. Recent trials have found that B vitamins, because they help the body make neurotransmitters, can bolster the effectiveness of antidepressants. And a review by the renowned Cochrane Collaboration concluded that amino acids work better than placebos to alleviate depression. But the research is far from definitive, warns Carlat. “I tell patients, ‘You’re experimenting. Supplements are probably not going to harm you, but they may not help, either.’”

For many women, however—especially those in their childbearing years, who are particularly vulnerable to depression—a natural alternative to drugs sounds worth a try. When Lisa, a 45-year-old college professor in California, began having suicidal thoughts after the birth of her daughter in 2008, her doctor put her on Prozac and Wellbutrin. She felt better, but as time passed she developed a tolerance to the medication, so her doctor raised the dosages, and she started having night sweats and “vivid, horrendous dreams.” After two years, she felt the downsides outweighed the

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benefits. “I never intended to stay on the medication forever,” Lisa says. She began weaning herself off the meds without consulting her doctor, and did so over just two weeks—a rash move. The quick withdrawal left her with erratic sleep and unstable moods. Lisa called Ross, who put her on a five-times-a-day regimen of amino acids, vitamins, and cortisol supplements for sluggish adrenal function. “Within a couple of weeks, my moodiness and sleep problems subsided, and they haven’t come back.”

For most people it takes a few months to a year or more to feel well, says Hedaya. To bolster the process, nutrition therapists recommend regular exercise, sufficient sleep, and stress reduction, as well as a diet centered on vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, fish, lean meat, poultry, and healthy fats.

Makes popping pills look easy. “But look what you gain: a healthy lifestyle and an understanding of what’s at the root of your emotional problems,” says Ross. “You can treat depression with drugs, but the only way to change your brain chemistry permanently is by restoring normal neurotransmitter function. When you do that, you’re not just temporarily better. You’re basically cured.” □

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