

Complementary Therapies

and mental illness

What are complementary therapies?

These are ways of helping yourself stay healthy which complement medical treatment. While these can be useful, care needs to be taken, especially when you have a mental illness. Some people use them instead of medical treatment or without consulting their doctor – this can be dangerous as substances used in ‘natural’ therapy are not required to undergo the same rigorous tests for safety as prescribed medications. The term ‘natural’ is also misleading, as most prescribed medications are actually derived from natural substances too.

There are many types of complementary therapies, with varying degrees of effectiveness. It is very important that you consult with your doctor before using any of them, especially regarding interaction with prescribed medications.

Physical therapies

Being physically active is good for us all in lots of ways.

- **Exercise** is shown by research to have a definite effect in reducing the symptoms of depression and anxiety disorders. You don't have to join a gym – it's enough to get brisk exercise at least three times a week, for a minimum of 30 minutes. This could include running, walking fast, or cycling, for example. Consult your doctor before starting, if you have not exercised for a while.
- **Yoga** can reduce stress and worry, and this in turn can have a beneficial effect on symptoms of depression. Yoga does not suit everyone, but can be helpful for some people, such as those with anxiety disorders.
- **Massage** can relax people in a similar way to yoga, and lead to reduced symptoms of depression. It should be performed by a trained professional, and only if you are comfortable with a stranger touching your body.

Nutritional and herbal therapies

Eating fresh, healthy food is important for our mental as well as physical health. Evidence is poor, however, that consuming herbs or other substances makes a significant difference to the symptoms of mental illnesses.

- **Omega 3** fish oils (found in sardines especially) are important for our general health and maintaining good brain function. There is no evidence that they reduce the symptoms of depression, but may be helpful in reducing the risk of psychotic illnesses such as schizophrenia.

- **St John's Wort** can be effective in reducing symptoms for people with mild to moderate depression. However, it should not be taken at the same time as antidepressant medication prescribed by a doctor. St John's Wort can interact with other medications to cause a range of problems – increasing the effects of some while decreasing the effects of others.
- **SAME** may be helpful for some people with mild to moderate depression. People with bipolar disorder should not take SAME, however, as it may induce a manic episode. It should not be taken at the same time as a prescribed antidepressant, because of the danger of interactions.
- **Ginkgo biloba** and **Ginseng** have no effect on symptoms of depression. There is no evidence to support its use for this purpose.

Other therapies

- **Light therapy** can be helpful for some people affected by Seasonal affective disorder. Discuss with your doctor.
- **Homeopathy** has no effect on the symptoms of mental illness. There is no evidence to support its use for this purpose.
- **Meditation** can be helpful in reducing stress for some people, although there is no evidence that it reduces the symptoms of mental illness. It is not recommended for people severely affected by depression or those at risk of experiencing psychotic symptoms.

For more information about complementary therapies for depression, see the bluepages website, used as a source for this Factsheet: www.bluepages.anu.edu.au. SANE Australia also produces a range of easy-to-read publications and multimedia resources on mental illness:

- **[SANE Guide to Healthy Living](#)**
Explains how to be physically healthy, for people living with a mental illness.
- **[SANE Guide to Medication and other Treatments](#)**
Explains how treatments for mental illness work, including clinical care, support in the community and helping yourself.

To order visit the SANE Bookshop at www.sane.org or call 1800 18 SANE (7263).