

Differential Treatment of Depression and Anxiety With Botanical Medicines

©2006 David Winston, RH (AHG)

In our culture talking about mental illness is a rather recent phenomenon, but the experience of mental illness is as old as human existence. Over the ages various emotional/psychological problems have been given many diverse names (madness, hysteria, "the vapors", lunacy, the blues, melancholia, etc.) and associated with many causes (the moon, being female, menstruation self-abuse (masturbation), emotional weakness, religious fervor, and many other equally flawed explanations).

We still have a relatively poor understanding of psychological illness and in many ways, even though we have a much greater knowledge of the brain and brain chemistry, it has become much more difficult to separate what is an emotional or physical ailment.

Western medicine's reliance on either talk therapy or SSRI medications (Paxil, Wellbutrin, Prozac, Zoloft, etc.) or other types of antidepressants offers benefits but often does not address the personal nutritional, familial, or societal causes. Over the years I have seen many patients who were helped by conventional treatments only to continue to stay in bad jobs, bad relationships, and unhappy circumstances. They could function better, but were still lacking in joy and contentment. The theory that all depression is caused by deficiency of serotonin is flawed and overly simplistic. There are several ways that orthodox medicine classifies depression. The Hamilton Depression (HAM-D) rating scale rates the severity of depression. A score of 10-13 is mild depression, a score of 14-17 is mild to moderate depression (dysthymic depression) and greater than 17 is moderate to severe depression (major depression). Patients with severe depression (scores greater than 20) tend to be resistant to treatment. In addition, some people are seen as having mixed anxiety/depression disorders, manic or bi-polar depression, seasonal affective disorder (SADs), post traumatic stress disorder (which often includes depression and anxiety) and situational depression (also known as adjustment disorder with depression).

All of these disorders are very real, but from a more integrative perspective, it is important to understand the root causes of the disorder in order to effectively treat the person. First we look at personal health, family relationships, career, and spiritual issues. Growing up in a family with a depressed parent is a major risk factor for you to be depressed. In some cases the issue may be genetic, but frequently depression is a learned behavior and coping mechanism. The tendency to become depressed and feel a certain degree of comfortability in one's depression can be unlearned. People in relationships with a depressed person are more likely to become depressed themselves – depression can be contagious! It is not enough for the depressed person to receive counseling and treatment, the entire family should be given help.

We live in a very stressful, complicated, and often confusing world. Our expectations of ourselves, our significant others, our children, and our lives are enormous. Many of us live isolated lives, with unfulfilling relationships and careers. It is not uncommon for people to feel empty, with no direction, no realistic goals (winning the lottery is not a realistic goal), struggling to make ends meet and feeling a very real sense of desperation and hopelessness. If this is truly someone's life, then I would suggest that depression is a very sane and rational response to the life and circumstances that person lives in. People in good relationships, people with a sense of purpose, people with a deep spiritual connection are more resistant to depression.

Many other factors are involved, most competent herbalists, upon hearing a patient is depressed, inquire as to the state of that person's digestion and eliminatory function. While this might seem irrelevant, it most certainly is not. Much of the body's serotonin is produced in the GI tract, in the "enteric brain". So intestinal dysbiosis, constipation, chronic diarrhea, IBS, IBD, leaky gut syndrome, and other GI tract disorders can directly affect mental health. As an herbalist, I see certain herbs as being specific for GI related depression (Culver's Root, coffee, Evening Primrose leaf/root).

In ancient Greek medicine, the word melancholia described a state in which a person had an excess of the black (melan) bile (choler). This humoral imbalance led to symptoms including despondency, anxiety, depression, moodiness, loss of appetite, insomnia, and bilousiness. This symptom picture is indicative of hepatic depression which can be treated with St. John's wort, Rosemary, Culver's Root, and Evening Primrose herb/root.

In women (and to a lesser degree, men) hormonal depressions can occur, post-partum and menopausal depression are the most common. Herbs such as Black Cohosh, Cactus (Selinocereus), Tiger Lily, and Pulsatilla are most likely to be effective for this type of depression.

Stagnant depression is a term I coined to describe a type of chronic situational depression. In these cases some type of trauma has occurred in a person's life and it becomes the center for their existence. Literally these entire existence revolves around and fixates on this event. In some cases it is a truly terrible tragedy-the loss of a child, parent, or spouse. For some it could be the loss of a pet, a job, or even something most of us would not consider especially significant. Post traumatic stress disorder fits into the category of stagnant depression, as does chronic unrelenting grief. Several herbs have great benefit for this type of depression including Lavender, Rosemary, Damiana, Rose petals, Holy Basil, and Mimosa bark.

Depression is also a common disorder in the elderly. There are multiple causes for this, including fear of death and disease, loss of a spouse or friends, medication induced depression (corticosteroids, pegylated interferon/ribavirin therapy, statin drugs), substance induced depression (alcohol), malnutrition, cholesterol levels under 148 in men, menopause, andropause, and illness (diabetes, Alzheimer's, congestive heart failure, etc.). Various herbs may be appropriate for depression in the elderly including Cactus, Damiana, Ginkgo, Mimosa bark, as well as adaptogens. Do not use St. John's wort with elderly patients (or any person) taking Warfarin, Digoxin, and medications that prevent organ transplant rejection.

Depression

Asafoetida gum resin (*Ferula asafoetida*) - depression with nervous irritation, hysteria, headache, dizziness, and flatulence. The muscles are tight, ticklish, or painful to the touch (body armour).

Dose: tincture (1:5) - 5-30 gtt TID

Black Cohosh root (*Cimicifuga racemosa*) - "doom and gloom" depression, which is a hormonal depression (post-partum, menstrual, or menopausal). Use it with Cactus and Tiger Lily.

Dose: fresh root tincture (1:2) - 10-15 gtt TID

Cactus stem (Selenicereus grandiflorus) - depression with excessive fear, and it is especially useful in depression caused by menopause (use it with Black Cohosh and Tiger Lily), old age (use it with Damiana and Ginkgo), and heart disease (use it with Hawthorn and Rhodiola).
Dose: fresh plant tincture (1:2) - 10-30 gtt in 4 oz. water, mix. Take 1 tsp. every 2 hours

Coffee bean (Coffea arabica) - nervous depression with dull thoughts and constipation. For heavy consumers of coffee, withdrawal can cause minor depression, headaches, and constipation.
Dose: as a beverage - 1-2 cups per day

Cola nut (Cola acuminata) - neurasthenia with mental despondency and foreboding. The patient is quiet or silent about their troubles.
Dose: tincture (1:5) - 1-2 ml QID

Culver's Root/Leptandra (Veronicastrum virginicum) - depression with dull headaches, especially behind eyes, enlarged liver, and clay-colored stools. Leptandra is used with Rosemary and St. John's wort for "hepatic depression".
Dose: tincture (1:5) 2-5 gtt, every 2-3 hours

Damiana herb (Turnera diffusa) - mild depression with a marked loss of libido. Depression of the elderly and stagnant depression (use it with Lavender and Rosemary).
Dose: tincture (1:5) - 2-4 ml TID
tea - 1 tsp. dried herb, 8 oz. hot water, steep 30 minutes, take 4 oz. TID

Evening Primrose leaf, root bark, flower (Oenothera biennis) - depression associated with chronic dyspepsia, vomiting, and frequent desire to urinate. The patient is apathetic, gloomy, and despondent. This is one of the best herbs for GI-related depression. Use it with Culver's Root and St. John's wort.
Dose: tincture (1:5) - 2-3 ml TID

Fresh Milky Oat seed (Avena sativa) - situational depression in type A, hyperactive people who are emotionally brittle from chronic stress. Use it with adaptogens.
Dose: fresh seed tincture (1:2) - 1 tsp. QID

Ginkgo leaf (Ginkgo biloba) - depression caused by vascular insufficiency due to old age or head trauma injuries. Ginkgo has also been shown to reduce antidepressant-induced anorgasmia (in women) and lack of libido; use it with Damiana and Asian Ginseng.
Dose: extract standardized to 24% flavonoid glycosides - 40 mg. gtt TID
fresh plant extract (1:2) - 3-4 ml QID

Holy Basil herb (Ocimum sanctum) - is an adaptogen used for stagnant depression. The patient is fixated on a specific traumatic event, and complains of fatigue and mental fog. Use it with Lavender, St. John's wort, & Rosemary.
Dose: fresh extract (1:2) - 3-4 ml TID
tea - 1 tsp. dried herb, 8 oz. hot water, steep 15 minutes, take 1-2 cups per day

Lavender flower (Lavendula angustifolia) - mild depression with difficulty thinking, the patient may remark that he/she is in a fog. Stagnant depression - the patient is fixated on a specific traumatic event. Lavender mixes well with St. John's wort, Holy Basil, and Rosemary.
Dose: tincture (1:5) 2-3 ml TID
tea - 1 tsp. dried flowers, 8 oz. hot water, steep 20 minutes, take 4 oz. TID

Lemon Balm herb (*Melissa officinalis*) – is a wonderful mild mood elevator. Use it in combination with St. John's wort, for SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder).

Dose: fresh plant tincture (1:2) - 3-5 ml QID

tea - 1-2 tsp. dried herb, 8 oz. hot water, steep 15-20 minutes, take 2-3 cups per day

Mimosa flowers or bark (*Albizia julibrissin*) – is a profound mood elevator useful for deficient insomnia, moodiness, broken hearts, grief, and post traumatic stress disorder (use it with Hawthorn flowers/berries and Rose petals).

Dose: tincture (1:5) – 1-2 ml TID

Pulsatilla herb (*Anemone pulsatilla*) - depression with nervousness, dizziness, and restlessness. The patient is fearful, sad, constantly weeping with frequent exclamations of sorrow or grief. It can be used with Black Cohosh and Tiger Lily. For “Grumpy Old Man Syndrome” use it with Saw Palmetto and Ashwagandha.

Dose: fresh plant tincture (1:2) - 20-30 gtt in 4 oz. water, mix. Take 1 tsp. every 2-3 hours

Rhaponticum root (*Rhaponticum carthamoides*) – is also known as Leuzia or Maral root. It is used in Russia as an adaptogen, antioxidant, heart and liver tonic. In human studies the decoction relieved depression in recovering alcoholics.

Dose: tea: 2 tsp. cultivated dried root, 10 oz. water. Decoct 10-15 minutes, steep 45 minutes, take 4 oz. 4 times per day.

Rosemary herb (*Rosmarinus officinale*) - dull, lethargic depression, thinking is too much of a bother, constant mental fog. It is also for bilious (hepatic) depression (use it with Evening Primrose and St. John's wort) and depression with cerebral insufficiency (use it with Ginkgo).

Dose: tincture (1:5) - 2-4 ml TID

tea - 1 tsp. dried herb, 8 oz. water, steep 20 minutes, take 4 oz. TID

Rose petals (*Rosa spp.*) – can be used as aromatherapy or as a tea/tincture for mild depression, broken hearts, and sadness. Use it with Mimosa bark and Hawthorn berries/flowers.

Dose: tea: 1/2-1 tsp. Rose petals (mix with other herbs), to 8 oz. hot water. Steep 20 minutes, take 2 oz. TID.

St. John's wort flowering tops (*Hypericum perforatum*) – is useful for mild to moderate dysthymic or situational depression. The person has a dyspeptic outlook, a sour stomach, and a sour attitude (hepatic depression). Use it with Rosemary and Evening Primrose herb. Use it with Lemon Balm for SAD. Combining St. John's wort with SSRI's should only be done under a physician's supervision and with caution.

Dose: tincture (1:5) - 3-4 ml QID

Syrian Rue herb (*Peganum harmala*) – is mood elevator for asthenic, tired, deficient depressions.

Dose: tincture (1:5) 30-40 gtt TID

Tiger Lily bulb & herb (*Lilium lancifolium*) - depression with anxiety. The patient fears to be alone. Frequent muttering under the breath, and weeping. Usually it is associated with hormonal (menstrual, menopausal or post-partum) depression. Use it with Cactus, Black Cohosh, and/or Pulsatilla.

Dose: fresh plant extract (1:2) - 20 gtt in 4 oz. water, mix. Take 1 tsp. every 2-3 hours

White Baneberry root (Actea alba) - depression in women caused by hormonal imbalances with insomnia, headache, spasticity, and especially ovarian tenderness.

Dose: tincture (1:5) - 10-15 gtt in 4 oz. water, mix. Take 1 tsp. every 3 hours

Adjuncts to Antidepressant Herbs

The following adaptogens can be used as adjuncts along with antidepressant herbs for depression associated with exhaustion, chronic stress, HPA depletion (dark rings under the eyes, quivering tongue, old age) and chronic illness, i.e., CFIDS, fibromyalgia, autoimmune disease, etc.

American Ginseng root (Panax quinquefolius)
Asian Ginseng root (Panax ginseng)
Ashwagandha root (Withania somnifera)
Cordyceps fungus (Cordyceps sinensis)
Dang Shen root (Codonopsis pilosula)
Jiaogulan herb (Gynostemma pentaphyllum)
Licorice rhizome (Glycyrrhiza glabra)
Reishi mushroom (Ganoderma sinensis)
Rhodiola root (Rhodiola rosea)
Schisandra berry (Schisandra chinensis)
Siberian Ginseng root/stem (Eleutherococcus senticosus)

Anxiety

Occasional anxiety is normal. Feeling anxious about a job interview, public speaking, a first date, are normal responses to a stressful situation. For many people, chronic stress and chronic anxiety are closely linked. Elevated stress hormones (cortisol, adrenaline) can cause or exacerbate anxiety. Like depression, anxiety can be a learned behavior. Growing up in a household with an anxious parent increases the chances of an anxious child (there may be genetic components as well). Some medications and recreational drugs can exacerbate anxiety (amphetamines, cocaine), as can some medical conditions including Grave's Disease, anorexia, Alzheimer's Disease, PMS, and menopause. There are several diagnostic categories for anxiety disorders. They include:

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) – is characterized by chronic anxiety, constant worry, muscle tension, irritability, and in some cases insomnia, sweating, headaches, muscle pain, and fatigue.

Panic Disorder (anxiety attacks) – are intense, almost paralyzing episodes that can occur without warning. In patients with anxiety attacks, symptoms often include sweating, intense fear, difficulty breathing, fainting, dizziness, nausea, diarrhea, racing heart, hyperventilation, chest pain, and headaches.

PTSD, Social Anxiety (extreme shyness), and obsessive compulsive disorder are also classified as anxiety disorders.

Bacopa fresh herb (Bacopa monnieri) – is an effective anxiolytic, especially useful for "cloudy thinking", mental confusion with anxiety, and nervous exhaustion with agitation.

Dose: tincture (1:2) 2-4 ml TID

Black Haw bark (Viburnum prunifolium) - anxiety associated with pregnancy. Use it with Avena and Rescue Remedy.

Dose: fresh tincture (1:2.5) 2-4 ml TID

tea - 1-2 tsp. dried bark, 8 oz. water, decoct 15 minutes, steep 1/2 hour, take 4 oz. QID

Blue Vervain herb (Verbena hastata) - PMS or menopausal anxiety, anxiety with nervous tics, tremors, or spasms. Use it with Motherwort and Pulsatilla.

Dose: tincture (1:5) 1-2 ml QID

Cactus stem (Selenicereus grandiflorus) – the patient is nervous, sleepless, there is oppression in the chest and dyspnea, he/she fears some important function will cease (heart, breathing, they will die, etc.).

Dose: tea - 10-30 gtt in 4 oz. water, mix. Take 1 tsp. every 2-3 hours.

California Poppy fresh root & herb (Eschscholtzia californica) - useful in patients with excess/hyper insomnia, with anxiety, nervous tension, and stress headaches.

Dose: tincture (1:2) - 1.5-3 ml 3-4 times per day

Chinese Polygala root (Polygala tenuifolia) – is a very effective anxiolytic agent. I use it with Motherwort and Blue Vervain for general anxiety and with Pulsatilla for panic disorder. It is also used for insomnia, anxiety-induced palpitations, and impaired memory.

Dose: tincture (1:5): 1-1.5 ml TID

tea: 1 tsp. honey stir-fried Polygala, 8 oz. water. Decoct 5-10 minutes, steep 1 hour, take 2 oz. TID

Fresh Milky Oat seed (Avena sativa) – is useful for nervous exhaustion or neurasthenia with anxiety, irritability, labile emotions, and people who are emotionally brittle. Use it with adaptogens.

Dose: fresh seed tincture (1:2) - 4-6 ml QID

Gou Teng spine (Uncaria rynchophylla) – Gambir spines are used for anxiety with spasms, tics, and tremors. It also is of benefit for stress induced bruxism, headaches, and white coat hypertension. Use it with Blue Verbain, Scullcap, or Gastrodia.

Dose: tea: 1 tsp. dried stem with hooks, 8 oz. water, decoct 10 minutes, steep 10 minutes, take 4 oz. TID

Hawthorn fruit & flower (Crataegus oxycanthoides, C. monogyna) – I use a mixture of Hawthorn berry, flower, and leaf with Cactus and Motherwort for anxiety induced heart problems, sadness, and grief (with Mimosa bark and Rose petals), and for ADD/ADHD (here I prefer the solid extract).

Dose: tincture (1:5): 3-4 ml TID

tea: 1-2 tsp. dried berries, 10 oz. water, decoct 15 minutes, steep 40 minutes. Take up to 3-4 cups per day

solid extract: 1/4-1/2 tsp. BID

Hops strobile (Humulus lupulus) - nervous irritability or mild anxiety with wakefulness or gastric upset; use it with Chamomile, Valerian, or Catnip.

Dose: tincture (1:5) - 2-3 ml TID

Kava root (*Piper methysticum*) - anxiety with muscle tension, bruxism, restless leg syndrome, and pain. It can be combined with Scullcap, Blue Vervain, and Gambir spines.

Dose: tincture (1:5) 2-3 ml QID

Lotus seed (*Nelumbo nucifera*) – is used in TCM for disturbed shen symptoms including anxiety, excessive or disturbing dreams, and insomnia. It is usually combined with Gou Teng, Zizyphus seed, or Polygala. It is contraindicated for people with dry constipation.

Dose: tea: 1-2 tsp. dried seed, 10 oz. water, decoct 15 minutes, steep 45 minutes, take 4 oz. TID

Mimosa flowers or bark (*Albizzia julibrissin*) – anxiety or irritability, emotionally brittle patients. Mimosa calms disturbed shen (bad dreams, fears).

Dose: tincture (1:5) – 1-2 ml TID

Motherwort herb (*Leonurus cardica*) – is an excellent nervine and anxiolytic. Use it with Verbena hastata for PMS, menstrual, & menopausal anxiety. Add Pulsatilla for anxiety attacks.

Dose: tincture (1:2.5) – 2-4 ml TID

Passion Flower herb (*Passiflora incarnata*) - irritation of the brain, nervousness, restlessness, sleeplessness with muscle twitching, or circular thinking.

Dose: fresh tincture (1:2) - 30-40 gtt TID

tea - 1-2 tsp. dried herb, 8 oz. hot water, steep 45 minutes, take 1-2 cups per day

Scullcap herb (*Scutellaria lateriflora*) - nervousness or spasms due to mental overwork or physical exertion. Nervousness without apparent cause. The patient gets angry and "flies off the handle" easily.

Dose: fresh tincture (1:2) - 2-4 ml. TID

Tiger Lily bulb & herb (*Lilium lancifolium*) - depression with anxiety, the patient fears to be alone, with frequent muttering under the breath, and weeping. Usually it is associated with hormonal (menstrual, menopausal or post-partum) depression; use it with Cactus, Black Cohosh and Tiger Lily.

Dose: fresh plant extract (1:2) - 20 gtt in 4 oz. water, mix. Take 1 tsp. every 2-3 hours

Valerian root (*Valeriana officinale*) – the patient is restless, nervous, and agitated with a pale face and cool skin.

Dose: tincture (1:2) 2-4 ml TID

Hysteria

Asafoetida gum resin (*Ferula asafoetida*) – hysteria with headache, dizziness, and flatulence. The muscles are tight, ticklish, or painful to the touch (body armour).

Dose: tincture (1:5) - 5-30 gtt TID

Lobelia fresh herb or seed (*Lobelia inflata*) - hysteria with muscle tension, the jaws are locked, or the person has bruxism, muscle spasms, hiccoughs or torticollis.

Dose: tincture - fresh herb (1:2) - 10-20 gtt TID/QID

seed (1:5) - 5-15 gtt TID/QID

Eli Jones' Formula for Hysteria

Asafoetida	} equal parts	Dose: 20 gtt of each in 4 oz. water, mix, and take 1 tsp. as needed
Valerian		
Cypripedium (replace with gou teng/Gambir spines)		
Lobelia		

Bibliography

Jones, E.G., MD, Definite Medication, 1911, Therapeutic Pub. Co., Boston

Nieder Korn, J.S., MD, A Handy Reference Book, 1905, Lloyd Bros., Cincinnati

Pert, C., Molecules of Emotion, 1999, Simon & Schuster, New York

Rountree, R., Herbs and Nutrients For Modulating Mood Disorders, 2004, Medicines From The Earth Proceedings, pp. 73-81

Russo, E., Handbook of Psychotropic Herbs, 2001, Haworth Herbal Press, NY

Sionneau, P., Lu Gang, The Treatment of Diseases in TCM-Vol. I-Diseases of The Head and Face Including Mental/Emotional Disorders, 1996, Blue Poppy Press, Boulder, CO

Spinella, M., The Psychopharmacology of Herbal Medicine, 2001, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA

Winston, D., Herbal Therapeutics, Specific Indications For Herbs & Herbal Formulas, 2003, HTRL, Washington, NJ

Winston, D., Eclectic Specific Condition Review: Depression, in the Protocol Journal of Botanical Medicine, 1991, 2(1):72-73, 1996

Winston, D., Eclectic Therapeutics for Mental Health, Journal American Herbalists Guild, 2002:3(2): pp. 73-77

HAMILTON DEPRESSION RATING SCALE

The total Hamilton Depression (HAM-D) Rating Scale provides an indication of depression and, over time, provides a valuable guide to progress.

Classification of symptoms which may be difficult to obtain can be scored as:

0- absent; 1 - doubtful or trivial; 2 - present.

Classification of symptoms where more detail can be obtained can be expanded to:

0 - absent; 1 - mild; 2 - moderate; 3 - severe; 4 - incapacitating.

In general the higher the total score the more severe the depression.

HAM-D score level of depression

10 - 13 mild; 14-17 mild to moderate; > 17 moderate to severe.

Assessment is recommended at two weekly intervals.

HAM-D Rating Scale	Pre-treatment	1st follow up	2nd follow up
Symptoms	Date	Date	Date
1 Depressed mood	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4
2 Guilt feelings	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4
3 Suicide	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4
4 Insomnia – early	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2
5 Insomnia – middle	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2
6 Insomnia – late	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2
7 Work and activities	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4
8 Retardation – psychomotor	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4
9 Agitation	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4
10 Anxiety – psychological	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4
11 Anxiety – somatic	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4
12 Somatic symptoms GI	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2
13 Somatic symptoms –General	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2
14 Sexual dysfunction - menstrual disturbance	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2

15	Hypochondrias	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4
16	Weight loss- by history	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2
	- by scales	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2
17	Insight	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2