- Alternative medicine

Overcoming depression beyond medication

How proper nutrition, regular exercise, and daily sun exposure can support mental wellbeing

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Aperson cannot be expected to be in high spirits all the time. There are ups and downs in life. There are unfortunate and tragic events that affect us mentally and emotionally. However, experiencing a serious mood disorder requires attention.



Persistent feelings of sadness, loneliness, emptiness, apathy, or hopelessness, loss of interest, and crying spells lasting more than two weeks require medical attention. Thoughts of wanting to die and suicidal ideation constitute an emergency. Depression can be fatal.

Depression does not only affect an individual psychologically. It is also physically debilitating, as manifested by unexplained aches and pains in various areas of the body, fatigue, lack of energy, sleep disturbances, and changes in one's appetite.

Depression can be triggered by many factors. These could be genetic, environmental, psychological, or biological, including nutrient deficiencies, medical conditions, chemical imbalances, and lifestylerelated factors.

While clinical depression is primarily managed through psychotherapy, including cognitive behavioral therapy, and medication such as antidepressants, an individual suffering from depression must also be willing to adopt a healthy lifestyle and make behavioral modifications to effectively overcome depression.

The brain and the gut have a connection called the gut-brain axis. The intestine is home to trillions of live microorganisms that affect the production of brain chemicals. This is called the gut microbiome. These beneficial microorganisms need to be fed to proliferate and do their job. Stress already kills them, so it is important to feed them with prebiotics from fiber. Dietary fiber is found only in plant food sources, mainly vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts, and seeds. Animal products like meat and dairy do not contain fiber. While fermented animal milk, or kefir, contains live microorganisms, it does not contain fiber.

It is important to intentionally eat fresh fruits instead of sugary foods, especially when cravings for sweets are intense. Do not skip carbohydrates from whole grains, fruits, and vegetables because these will pave the way for the amino acid tryptophan to have priority access to the brain for the production of moodstabilizing hormones.

Tryptophan is found in animal products. However, it is best to limit animal meat consumption, as plant-based protein sources like soy, quinoa, peas, beans, and other legumes offer additional anti-inflammatory effects and fiber. Therefore, they are better choices.

These are some plant-based sources of tryptophan: leafy greens, soy, mushrooms, bananas, broccoli, peas, oats, pumpkin and sunflower seeds, and nuts. Nuts and seeds must not be eaten in large quantities because they are high in calories from fat. A tablespoon or two a day will do.

When an individual is depressed, staying in bed is so tempting due to a lack of energy and fatigue. Getting in a full hour of intense exercise may not be practical. However, the goal is to eventually establish a regular exercise routine that can be sustained. Begin by intentionally standing up more often and doing some stretching exercises. Progress to walking for five to 10 minutes at a time, several times a day.

Exercise helps the body produce mood-stabilizing hormones that are also involved in the regulation of mood, sleep, appetite, and digestion.

Feeling depressed? Begin walking, even inside your room or office. It may not initially feel good, but it may help you feel better afterward. Just get moving, even if you don’t feel like it at all.

There are three ways to naturally produce the mood-stabilizing hormone serotonin: through proper food intake, regular exercise, and daily sun exposure. We often neglect the benefits of sunlight. We think that it is only good for the bones because of vitamin D. As you step into sunlight, eye cells detect the intense light and brightness, signaling the brain to produce serotonin. This speeds up the conversion of the amino acid tryptophan from food into serotonin.

Sun exposure also regulates the circadian rhythm, or body clock, to help regulate sleep patterns. Getting adequate, quality sleep is a challenge when a person has depression. Sleep is very important in the healing process. Therefore, be intentional about getting at least five to 10 minutes of sun exposure in the morning or anytime upon waking up.

Do not just rely on medications. With medical intervention, psychotherapy, nutrition, and other lifestyle modifications, there is hope for overcoming depression.