



# a different way to deal with depression

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**While traditional treatment** for depression involves antidepressant drugs and therapy, techniques of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) can also be used to help treat depression, especially in mild to moderate cases. These simple yet effective practices, ranging from increased physical activity to meditation, can have positive results by improving symptoms of depression and anxiety.

The use of CAM techniques to treat depression is actually quite widespread. A 2001 study published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* found that 66.7% of respondents with severe depression who visited conventional doctors also reported using complementary or alternative therapies in their treatment.

People often turn to CAM-based treatments for depression because of concerns regarding the efficacy and safety of commonly prescribed antidepressant drugs.

For example, a 2008 study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* described how the results of clinical trials of conventional antidepressant medications are often selectively published. While only 51% of the trials showed positive results according to the FDA, published literature made it appear as if 94% of the trials were positive. Some of the negative trials were not published, while others were published in a way that highlighted only positive results.

According to Dr. Helen Lavretsky, MD, professor in the UCLA Department of Psychiatry, hesitation about antidepressant drugs is common. "People tend to use complementary and alternative medicine for their symptoms of depression because they consider these approaches more natural than traditional drugs or psychotherapy," she says.

However, it is important to note that the effectiveness of these methods depends on the severity of depression. Patients should always consult a health care professional before starting any type of treatment.

According to Lavretsky, "CAM approaches can be used alone for mild cases of depression, anxiety, or insomnia. However, in severe cases, one should seek professional help because of the potential health and suicide risks of chronic severe depression."

## defining depression and its symptoms:

While people might throw around the term "depressed" after having a bad day or week, depression is actually a serious and recurring mental condition that interferes with normal functioning. According to UCLA Counseling and Psychological Services, depression is a state in which "we are overwhelmed by thoughts of worthlessness, pessimism and hopelessness, and we are not able to function in daily life."

There are general symptoms of depression, though these symptoms can vary between individuals. Emotional and cognitive signals of depression include feelings of worthlessness, inability to find happiness in routine activities, and poor concentration and memory. Behavioral or motivational symptoms include isolation and withdrawal, neglect of appearance, and lack of enjoyment or satisfaction. Physical or biological signs of depression can include changes in energy level, sleeping patterns, appetite, weight, or daily activity.

Symptoms of depression can be especially common among college students who are adjusting to a different lifestyle and dealing with stressors from academics and personal relationships. In a 2000 study conducted by the American College Health Association and published in *Psychiatric News*, 38% of responding college students reported that they had depressed feelings that made it difficult to function, while 10% reported having been diagnosed with depression.

## different kinds of depression:

Depressive disorders are characterized by certain symptoms that are severe and recurring throughout a certain period of time, as defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The duration of symptoms varies in the following depressive disorders:

### MAJOR DEPRESSIVE DISORDER:

Major depressive disorder is defined by symptoms that are debilitating and affect the ability to function regularly. It often includes a loss of interest in activities that were formerly enjoyable. Periods of major depression last at least two weeks, though often longer, and can recur throughout life.

### DYSTHYMIC DISORDER:

Dysthymic disorder is classified based on chronic symptoms of depression that are less intense, but are more long-term in that they often last over two years. These symptoms may not be disabling, but they still impact daily behavior and mood.

### SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER:

Seasonal affective disorder is characterized by symptoms of depression during the same period each year. In one common form, symptoms appear during the months of fall and winter when there is less sunlight.

# integrative treatments for depression

## MIND-BODY TECHNIQUES:



Mind-body techniques involve practices that explore the relationship between the mind and physical health, including deep breathing, yoga, journaling, and meditation. These techniques encourage relaxation and attempt to relieve stress.

A 2005 study published in the

*Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* found that the breathing patterns of Sudarshan Kriya yoga could help alleviate depression and anxiety by creating a state of “calm alertness.” Authors of the study suggest that these breathing techniques function by calming the stress response. “Mind-body techniques, such as Tai Chi, Qi-gong, yoga and meditation, can help reduce stress and inflammation, and improve insomnia and anxiety that accompany depression,” said Dr. Lavretsky, who studied the effects of Tai Chi in older adults, and found that it improved cognition, depression, and resilience to stress.

## AROMATHERAPY:



Aromatherapy involves the application of essential oils that are extracted from certain plants and flowers. These oils can be inhaled or applied directly to the skin. Scents commonly used to treat anxiety and depression include bergamot, lavender, jasmine,

sandalwood, and ylang-ylang. These oils are used to help relax the mind and reduce stress. A 2002 study published in the *American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Care* examined how 17 cancer hospice patients responded to lavender aromatherapy treatment. They found that the patients showed slight improvement in their symptoms of pain, anxiety, and depression.

Another study, published in *Complementary Therapies in Nursing and Midwifery* in 2003, found that patients who received aromatherapy massages over 6 weeks showed improvement in their mood, anxiety, and sense of relaxation in the short term, though more research needs to be done to qualify the benefits.

## EXERCISE:



Though it seems basic, getting out and exercising can improve both your physical and mental health. As you exercise, your body releases endorphins and neurotransmitters that can improve your mood. Exercise,

especially aerobic exercise, also keeps your body fit by lowering blood pressure and protecting against heart disease.

Exercise can lead to improved self-esteem and reduced stress, which can help relieve the mind of worries that contribute to anxiety and depression. Dr. Lavretsky also adds, “If exercise is performed in a group, it increases social interaction and social support that are also highly beneficial for reducing depression.”

A 2000 study published in the *Psychosomatic Medicine Journal* found that a 4-month treatment of aerobic exercise led to improvements in depression symptoms that were comparable to the group of patients receiving traditional drug therapy. However, after 10 months, patients in the exercise group were less likely to have relapsed in depressive symptoms.

## ST. JOHN'S WORT:



St. John's wort is an herb often used to alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression. It can be purchased as a capsule, tea, or liquid extract. Studies have shown that the herb is useful for treating mild to moderate

depression, though the exact mechanism for this effect is unknown.

Some research has questioned the use of St. John's wort in the treatment of major depression. In fact, a 2002 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that using St. John's wort to treat moderately severe major depression did not improve symptoms compared to a placebo.

It is also important to remember that St. John's wort is a dietary supplement, not a prescription medication regulated by the FDA. Additionally, the herb has been shown to interact with certain medications. According to Dr. Lavretsky, “one must be aware of potential dangers and risks of combining St. John's wort with standard antidepressants and some other medications. Taking an ‘herbal’ preparation does not make it ‘safe.’”