

The Integrative Approach to Mental Health

By Dr. Deidre Macdonald, ND

One's mental health is a reflection of both the mind and the body. There are effective, long term strategies to improve mood, increase energy, decrease anxiety, and balance neurotransmitter function. Creating an individualized program to address the underlying causes of mood and mental disorders is a powerful path towards greater health and happiness.

When I am working with a patient who is suffering from mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, or psychiatric illness, the first step is to do a thorough health assessment. The brain is an organ like the liver, heart and lungs. For the brain to function optimally, it needs to be supported by a healthy physical body. Much insight can be gained through a good history, physical exam, and assessment of lab work. Getting to know the patient, their goals, and their history helps us to co-create a program to enhance mental and physical health.

The next step is to address possible underlying causes of physical and mental issues. When the body is supported to function at its best, there is greater balance in the body and mind. Each of the following medical issues can profoundly affect mood and mental functioning.

Nutritional deficiencies – Patients receive coaching on how to optimize their food intake, focusing on creating a diet that fuels the brain at every meal. Specific nutrients are required for optimal functioning of the neurotransmitters that govern mood and more.

Hormone balance – Changing levels of estrogen, progesterone, testosterone and more can affect our mood and both mental and physical functioning. Naturopathic programs to enhance hormone function naturally or with bio-identical hormones can provide a much needed boost.

Thyroid levels – Assessing the thyroid is a complex task requiring detailed knowledge of the biochemistry of the body. Often low thyroid levels are missed, and this common cause of mood disorders is overlooked. Naturopathic strategies to optimize thyroid function help to increase mood, energy, mental acuity and more.

Digestive Issues – Without optimal digestive function, the brain function will be compromised. The digestive organs are where we take in the nutrients essential for neurotransmitter function. It is also where we eliminate waste and toxins from the body. Many patients experience better mood, greater mental acuity, and increased energy when their digestive concerns are addressed in a real and lasting way.

Food allergies – Many people don't know that there are foods they eat that are creating fatigue or worse symptoms. In fact, at least 30% of people with schizophrenia are allergic to gluten (celiac disease), vs. only .3% of the total population. Celiac disease can decrease circulation to the brain, cause atrophy of parts of the brain, and cause calcifications of the brain. Proper assessment of celiac disease and coaching on the complexities of gluten elimination, are essential for recovery in these people.

Adrenal function – The adrenal glands produce hormones like adrenalin and cortisol that are intimately linked with brain function and nervous system regulation. Chronic stress, chronic pain,

excess stimulants and allergies can all deplete or deregulate the adrenal glands. With a program of lifestyle changes, pain management, and natural medicines, the adrenal glands can become better regulated. Anxiety is reduced, energy is enhanced and mental processes are optimized.

Pain - Chronic pain is a major source of depression for many people. Naturopathic physicians are trained in physical medicine and can assess and treat chronic pain with a variety of techniques. Laser therapy is an excellent choice for degenerative and arthritic issues, as well as other muscle / tendon / nerve issues. A program to reduce inflammation in the body can help to reduce pain and enhance health.

Sleep Issues: Insomnia can rob you of your vitality and push a delicate nervous system seriously out of balance. Many people can overcome insomnia through good sleep habits, relaxation techniques, behavioural therapy and natural medicines. Pharmaceutical medicines are a last resort and are associated with a significant increase in pre-mature death from cancer and other causes.

The next step in overcoming mental health issues is stress management coaching and counselling. I've spent many years developing a powerful tool kit for helping patients manage stress and enhance their resilience to life's challenges on the physical, emotional and spiritual planes. For instance, at the Macdonald Centre for Natural Medicine, I lead weekly relaxation classes. During this nine week series of noon-hour classes participants experience guided visualization for self healing and mindfulness training. Alternatively, patients can enjoy individualized relaxation sessions. During these one-on-one sessions, I discuss the patient's particular stresses then guide them through an individualized relaxation and visualization session. Patients feel relaxed and refreshed and come away with practical tools for coping with daily life. More in-depth trauma counselling, addiction counselling and marriage counselling is available through an in-house referral to a trained counsellor.

Finally, there are natural and pharmaceutical medicines that can enhance the nervous system and balance neurotransmitters. I work with patients to help them assess all their treatment options, from herbal medicine, amino acid therapy, nutritionals and pharmaceutical medicines.

Dr. Deidre Macdonald is a licensed naturopathic physician who has been practicing for 16 years in downtown Courtenay. She received her psychology degree from UBC and her medical doctorate from an accredited naturopathic medical school in Portland, Oregon. For more information contact her office at 250 897-0235 or via www.getwellhere.com.