

# LIFT YOUR MOOD

In the final extract from her new book, **Susan Clark**, Style's alternative-health columnist, looks at how natural remedies can help dispel depression, feed your brain and ward off anxiety

**W**ho wouldn't jump at the chance to be clear-thinking seven days a week, or to be consistently happy? Depression, mounting stress levels and panic attacks cause most of us to have disabling periods of angst, so it is vital to know what we can do to lift our mood and maximise our brainpower. A dramatic change in lifestyle is often the answer, yet rarely a realistic one.

Thankfully, you can use food, herbs and nutritional supplements to bolster levels of the brain chemicals that control everything you feel.

Many people take vitamin C to ward off colds, but what they may not realise is that the brain needs more of this nutrient than any other part of the body. So, while fending off their colds, these people are unwittingly supporting brain function.

Even if you are not suffering from depression, you can use natural remedies to lift and maintain a better mood. Simply burning *Melissa officinalis* oil in the room can not only make you feel better, but improve brain performance. Intrigued? Read on.

## BEATING THE BLUES

Depression is part of the human condition, but while in most people it will be triggered by an outside event, such as the death of a loved one, for 5% of the population it is a clinical disorder that will not go away simply because someone tells you to buck up.

Women are up to three times more likely to suffer from depression than men. Heredity plays a role, too — both depression and suicide appear to cluster in families. The symptoms reflect changes in levels of the brain chemicals, specifically norepinephrine (a chemical cousin of adrenaline), the feelgood brain chemical serotonin and dopamine, and insomnia is almost invariably a side effect.

Natural remedies that help to regulate mood usually work to increase levels of serotonin: a good example is **St John's wort**, the popular supplement that has become known as nature's own Prozac. Useful for the treatment of mild to moderate depression, it helps to maintain normal levels of serotonin by blocking its breakdown in the body. The herb now comes with a warning on the packet for anyone taking anticoagulant medication, and for those who have been taking the contraceptive pill for a long time, which means many consumers have been looking for "alternative" alternatives.

*Rhodiola* would be my herb of choice for any mood disorder, because it can simultaneously help to improve the body's resistance

to stress and normalise other systems, including hormones and immunity. It also works to increase dopamine levels, which makes it an important remedy for adults and children coping with attention deficit disorders and hyperactivity.

The B vitamins are also important in tackling depression. **Vitamin B6**, for example, is needed to convert tryptophan (a serotonin precursor) into serotonin. Deficiency is often caused by taking prescription drugs, so supplementing this nutrient is a good idea.

The food you eat plays a critical role as well. Depression and other common mood disorders are frequently linked with imbalances in the essential fatty acids (EFAs) that protect brain-cell membranes, and vitamin C is also important, because it helps to maintain normal brain function.

One of the most widely investigated non-drug antidepressants is **S-adenosyl methionine (SAMe)**, a naturally occurring substance that the body uses to make neurotransmitters. It is sold in health stores, but it's expensive to use in a therapeutic dosage in the long term, which makes the other remedies more attractive if cost is an issue.

The simplest antidote to depression is exercise, which can also help counter associated tiredness by raising levels of serotonin. You may hate the thought of having to move your body, but depression and chronic tiredness are two of the big risk factors for mortality as we age, so you will be investing in your health in a way that will pay significant dividends in the longevity stakes as you get older.

## TRIED AND APPLIED

Use essential fatty acids with antidepressants to enhance their effects. In trials, patients taking antidepressants who were also given 1g of EFAs, twice daily, scored lower on the scales of depression after a month than those given a placebo. Researchers concluded that the fatty acids either augment the action of the prescription medicine without adverse side effects or have their own antidepressant properties.

## THE ONE TO WATCH — MELISSA OFFICINALIS

Traditionally, herbalists have used lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) as a remedy for melancholia, and scientists have shown that it really does have both a calming and mood-boosting effect on the brain. Even used as an aromatherapy oil, lemon balm can have a dramatic impact on the brain. I suggest you use a brand that provides 100mg of standardised extract of lemon balm per capsule, taking three a day. If you cannot find one locally, order from Revital (0800 252875, [www.revital.com](http://www.revital.com)). ▶

## ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS

A simple emergency measure is to rub calming lavender oil on the inside of both wrists or add it to a soothing bath. You can also drop the oil onto a tissue and inhale the aroma to help calm yourself. The Australian Bush Flower Essences also work quickly to help restore emotional equilibrium. Use **Emergency Essence** in the throes of an attack (take seven drops under the tongue) and switch to **Calm & Clear** until you have worked through the crisis. (For more details of these essences, which work on an energetic level, making them safe to use as an adjunct to other medication, visit [www.ancientroots.com](http://www.ancientroots.com).)

Avoiding stimulants, including caffeine, alcohol, sodas, chocolate, refined sugar and carbohydrates, can also help to fend off anxiety. And remember, if you are an anxiety sufferer, you are anything but alone. This is the single most common mental disorder encountered in clinical practice — about 8% of the population will experience at least one anxiety attack at some point in their lives — so there are thousands of others who know exactly what you are going through. To find them, contact the UK support group No Panic (0808 808 0545, [www.no-panic.org.uk](http://www.no-panic.org.uk)).

## ADDICTION AND VITAMIN C

Vitamin C can help to alleviate the misery of withdrawal from addictive drugs, including heroin. In trials where heroin addicts on detox programmes were given high doses of vitamin C, only 10-15% of participants suffered serious withdrawal symptoms, compared with 56% of those being weaned off the drug without vitamin C supplementation. This suggests that all detox and rehab centres should consider nutritional advice and supplementation as part of a recovery programme.

## TOP THREE OVER-THE-COUNTER COMBINATION REMEDIES FOR MOOD AND BRAIN SUPPORT

You can get all these from Victoria Health, which specialises in American supplements (0800 389 8195, [www.victoriahealth.com](http://www.victoriahealth.com)).

### New Chapter's Supercritical Neurozyme

This has the lot: omega-3 fatty acids, ginkgo biloba, vitamin E and more. You take one soft-gel capsule twice a day with food and a large glass of water.

### LifeTime's Brain Support

This excellent formula includes dimethylaminoethanol (DMAE), which is known as "IQ food", ginkgo biloba and phosphatidylserine: **Glutamine**

If you take only one supplement, take Glutamine (500mg, twice a day on an empty stomach). This is probably the single most important antioxidant and anti-inflammatory agent in the natural supplement arsenal. People take it for moodiness and depression. Glutamine helps improve thinking by picking up excess ammonia from the brain and can be useful in clearing the brain fog caused by excess alcohol and tiredness. Use a good-quality supplement such as Solgar's ([www.solgar.com](http://www.solgar.com)).

What Really Works in Natural Health: The Only Guide You'll Ever Need by Susan Clark is published on April 1 (£10.99 Bantam Press). To order a copy at the special price of £8.79 + 99p p&p, call The Sunday Times Books Direct on 0870 165 8565

Before following any medical or dietary advice referred to above, please consult your GP if you suffer from any health problems or special conditions, or are in any doubt as to its suitability

## A-Z OF BRAIN-NOURISHING FOODS

**Avocado** is one of nature's superfoods, rich in vitamin B6, which the brain needs to make serotonin, the neurotransmitter involved in the regulation of mood, depression and anxiety.

**Cabbage** is a vegetable source of memory-boosting choline.

**Dairy products** provide chromium, a trace element that helps to maintain blood-sugar levels (as does wholegrain rice).

**Eggs** provide tryptophan, another precursor for the feelgood brain chemical serotonin.

**Fish of the oily variety**, such as salmon or mackerel, are among the best sources of polyunsaturated fats, which are critical to mood and brain development.

**Grains** provide vitamin B3, which the brain needs to ward off senility. This nutrient has also been prescribed in large doses to help treat alcoholism and schizophrenia.

**Honey** has a natural sedative action on the brain. Dissolve a teaspoon of it in a glass of warm milk at bedtime to boost calcium levels and get a good night's sleep.

**Kale** is an excellent source of brain-calming and sleep-inducing calcium for those suffering from panic attacks, insomnia or both.

**Magnesium** is a muscle relaxant that can help overcome a panic attack; foods rich in this mineral include nuts, grains, beans, dark-green veg, fish and kiwi fruit.

**Oats** help to maintain blood-sugar levels and avoid mood swings.

**Pistachios** provide monounsaturated fats for energy.

**Pumpkin seeds** are a good source of omega-3 fatty acids.

**Soy** is an excellent source of brain-boosting phosphatidylcholine, which not only enhances the availability of other nutrients, but is also a key component of the neurotransmitter acetylcholine, low levels of which have been linked to memory loss.

**Tomatoes** provide the antidepressant nutrient phenylalanine, which can also enhance memory.

**Unsaturated fats** help protect brain cells and their membranes. Monounsaturated fats are present in avocado, cashews, peanuts, pistachios, pumpkin seeds and walnuts. Polyunsaturated fats are present in fish, flaxseed oil, sesame seeds, soybeans and sunflower oil.

**Vitamin E** can help boost circulation and thus the transportation of glucose and oxygen to the brain. As this nutrient is an important antioxidant, it can also protect brain cells from damage and destruction by free radicals. Foods rich in vitamin E include eggs, mayonnaise, milk, salmon, sweet potato, peanuts, cold-pressed oils, dark, leafy greens and lettuce.

**Wheatgrass juice** is a source of liquid oxygen and a natural antioxidant that is reported to promote "clearer thinking". You have to build up your tolerance to this supplement, which has an unpleasant taste.

**Xynergy** is the UK specialist supplier of green superfoods, including spirulina, that are rich in brain-supporting nutrients such as vitamin B5 (0845 658 5858).

**Yoghurt** is a good dietary source of tyrosine, the amino acid that transmits nerve impulses to the brain, helps to overcome depression, improves memory and increases mental alertness. Low levels of tyrosine have been linked with anxiety disorders and panic attacks. This nutrient is also found in avocados, eggs, cheese, bananas, spinach, watermelons, figs, cucumbers and watercress.

**Zinc** deficiency has been linked with hyperactivity and antisocial behaviour in adults and children. The therapeutic daily dose for adults is 30mg. You can increase the amount of zinc in your diet by eating more shellfish, pumpkin seeds, eggs and red meat.