

The Herbal Approach to Mental Well-Being

The topic today is about Mental Health in the workplace, examining the range of conditions which can affect employees and offering advice on how and where Herbal Medicine can play a part in supporting mental well-being.

It has become (almost) taboo to even mention the term mental health due to its negative connotations as well as the fear and panic that it can evoke. Every so often it surfaces in the public domain when high profile cases hit the media headlines. The recent and tragic death of Robin Williams is an example of how opportunities and a forum for discussion appears to only arise under such circumstances and how aware we are of mental illness but how society does not embrace this nor tackle it properly.

In reality though, mental health is an issue that line managers are dealing with more and more regularly. It is encouraging to see events like this today being organised.

The Government's report entitled 'No health without mental health' states that mental health problems affect 1:4 of us at some point in our lives with 1 in 4 people experiencing a mental health problem every year. It accounts for 30% of absences in the workplace, the highest being in the NHS.

In 2012, it was estimated that poor mental health in the workplace cost the UK £26billion every year, that's equivalent to £1,035 for every employee in the UK workforce. The average employee takes 7 days off sick every year with 40% of this being due to mental health problems.

What do we mean by mental health problem?

Mixed anxiety & depression	9.7 in 100 people
Anxiety	4.7 in 100 people
Post traumatic stress disorder	3.0 in 100 people
Depression	2.6 in 100 people
Phobias	2.6 in 100 people
Eating disorders	1.6 in 100 people
OCD	1.3 in 100 people
Panic disorder	1.2 in 100 people

There are variations in severity for each of these conditions as they are not all binary ie. you either have it or you don't.

Fig: Adult psychiatric morbidity in England, The Health & Social Care Information Centre, 2009

The Health & Social Care Information Centre, 2009, Adult psychiatric morbidity in England, Results of a household survey



Mental health can fluctuate along a spectrum in the same way that physical health does and there may be times when it is better than others. Mental health problems cover a range of conditions such as (the list is not exhaustive):

- depression
- anxiety
- panic attacks
- obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)
- phobias
- bipolar disorder (manic depression)
- schizophrenia
- personality disorders
- psychosis

For many people stress and mental health are closely associated. According to a report by CIPD / MIND, while stress itself is not a medical condition ‘...prolonged exposure to unmanageable stress is linked to psychological conditions such as anxiety and depression...’Managing stress is therefore a key part of creating a mentally healthy workplace.

Herbalism is the use of herbs for healing. People have been using herbs to cure diseases for centuries. Many herbal remedies worked and many did not, it is obvious that knowledge and technology would have played a big part (and still do) in finding nature’s hidden treasures and using them to achieving health benefits.

So how would a medical herbalist tackle a mental health problem? Well, first of all, a definitive diagnosis is key. This in itself is a problem *eg. differentiating between MCI and true dementia...*

Herbalists do not deal with serious mental health disorders such as paranoid schizophrenia or severe psychosis because they warrant conventional medical management. However, conditions such as depression (mild to moderate), anxiety, panic attacks, sleep disorders / insomnia, stress-related symptoms, and OCD amongst others.....

Although a little more straightforward, these conditions still have negative connotations and many people don’t readily want to admit a problem given the social stigmas and difficulties in accepting mental illness.

Equally, given that many employers, private companies, insurers and government agencies have access to so much of our personal information, including aspects of our medical records, it is unsurprising many are worried about declaring they have mental health problems.

More often than not, herbalists treat the more common symptoms such as mild to moderate depression, anxiety, insomnia, panic attacks, restlessness and the gamut of symptoms associated with stress. Let’s look at some examples:

<p>Mild to Moderate Depression</p>	<p>Antidepressants</p>	<p>St John’s Wort Rhodiola Turnera</p>
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Anxiety	Anxiolytics	Lemon Balm Passion Flower Lime Flowers
Panic Attacks	Nervine Tonics	Skullcap Wood Betony Verbena Vervain Rose
Insomnia/ Sleep Disorders	Sedatives	Chamomile Wild Lettuce Indian Ginseng
	Hypnotics	Valerian Hops Californian Poppy
Restlessness/ Agitation	Nutrients	Oats Alfalfa
	Nervines	Skullcap Wood Betony
Stress	Adaptogens	Korean Ginseng (<i>Panax ginseng</i>) Siberian Ginseng (<i>Eleutherococcus senticosus</i>) Indian Ginseng aka Ashwaghandha (<i>Withania somnifera</i>)

Stress-related symptoms

This requires a special mention as modern living makes it almost impossible to avoid stress. Prolonged stress can lead to all sorts of symptoms and part of our job as a herbalist would be to examine the bigger picture and to treat the patient in a holistic context.

Common symptoms of stress include:

- headaches
- skin breakouts & exacerbation of existing conditions eg. eczema, psoriasis
- IBS & exacerbation of other gut disorders eg. ulcers
- tiredness, fatigue, lethargy
- muscle aches & pains
- recurring and frequent infections eg. colds
- sleep problems & insomnia
- menstrual irregularities
- infertility

The treatment rationale invariably involves:

- adrenal support one of the first glands to be compromised
 adrenaline/noradrenaline
 cortisol (endogenous corticosteroid)
 testosterone
 aldosterone
- nerve support adaptogens & their functions
 Key herbs: Korean
 Siberian
 Indian
- immune support boosting immune function
 preventing recurring infections due to ↓ immune defence
 powerful immune boosters: echinacea
 astragalus
 turnera
 wild indigo
 St. John's Wort (antiviral)
- addressing debility usually with a range of stimulants, nervine tonics & nutrients
 all ↑ energy levels and are excellent for debilitated states:
 rosemary
 turnera
 astragalus
 ginsengs
 oats
 alfalfa
- antidepressant St. John's Wort (alternative rhodiola if compatibility issues)
 rosemary (stimulant)
 turnera
 Siberian ginseng
 Korean ginseng

Important physiological mechanisms at play

Borage
Licorice

Stress Management

- exercise
- relaxation techniques
- hobbies & recreational pursuits
- diet
- herbal supplementation

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