

The alternative to pills

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Prescriptions. Psychotherapy, food, sports, plants... can also help to fight against depression. Overview.

Psychotherapy, the first option

“Regardless of the level of depression, the treatment is primarily based on psychological support, which can be provided by the general physician, a psychologist or a psychiatrist, especially for complex and/or severe cases. It can take the form of supportive psychotherapy or other forms of psychotherapy (cognitive-behavioural, psychodynamic, systemic...)” These recommendations of the High Authority for Health (*la Haute Autorité de santé*) are clear: antidepressant drugs should not be used from the outset. *“They are not indicated in cases of mild depression, they can be considered for moderate depression and must be proposed from the outset for severe depression.”*

There are hundreds of forms of psychotherapy. Two precautions must be taken to make the right choice: consult a person with recognised scientific training and only engage with a therapist with whom you feel comfortable. The result depends directly on this.

Here are the main therapeutic methods :

Behavioral and cognitive therapies

These therapies focus on concrete and current problems. In a relatively limited amount of sessions (around 20 on average), the therapist helps the person to identify the causes of his/her ill-being and to get out of his/her all too often negative thoughts. Cognitive psychotherapy, based on mindfulness, which is becoming increasingly trendy, is based on the practice of meditation, which consists of observing negative emotions without judging them and transforming them into a neutral sensation.

Psychodynamic therapies

They are influenced by psychoanalysis and therefore appeal to the unconscious, to the difficulties encountered in childhood. They therefore require more time than the previous ones.

Systemic therapies

These group therapies are used when a person’s interaction with his/her environment is at the root of the problems. They enable the patient to work on the relationship with others and self-confidence. The therapeutic effect is linked to the quality of the exchanges and bonds that are created during group communication training sessions and the learning of problem-solving techniques.

Family therapies

They respond to specific situations where family functioning is at issue. The goal is to help everyone find their balance and their place in a peaceful relationship.

Medicinal plants for morale

St. John's wort, mucuna and griffonia are, according to Dr. Eric Lorrain¹, the best performing plants in cases of light to moderate depressions. They act on the disturbances of cerebral neurotransmitters encountered in mood disorders. St. John's wort (also named *millepertuis* because of the many holes present on its leaves and long used to treat cases of dementia) reinforces the action of serotonin, then acts on dopamine, making it a complete antidepressant. However, it must be prescribed by a doctor, as there are contraindications and interactions with certain drugs.

Moving to stay positive

The safest way to boost morale is physical activity. And, if it's "down in the dumps" you need to get it back up. A Norwegian study published earlier this year in the American Journal of Psychiatry involving nearly 34,000 adults followed for 11 years shows that 12% of cases of depression could potentially be prevented by at least one hour of physical activity per week. For specialists, the explanation is simple: it increases the production of endorphins, the morphines that the brain produces on its own. Prof. Michel Lejoyeux², for whom walking is already a good remedy, also advises making large movements of the arms along the body and making long strides. Thus, "*good memories come easily to mind*".

Anti-depression foods

It is easy enough to put together anti-depression menus, believes Pr. Michel Lejoyeux, since we know how certain foods affect the brain and mood. They constitute or renew the stock of molecules enabling this organ to manufacture its neuromediators. This is why psychiatrists advise their depressed patients to eat chocolate, eggs, coconut or even bananas. Even though there is no evidence that an increase in their consumption has a positive effect on mood.

Fish

Several studies have found that people who eat the most fish appear to be less depressed and less likely to be in a gloomy mood than those who eat fish very irregularly. Especially if it is rich in omega 3, which is beneficial for the global functioning of the brain. As for Dr. Stéphane Clerget³, he advocates the consumption of herring, especially smoked herring. Because it is, after cod liver, the food richest in vitamin D, a very useful vitamin for combating seasonal depression.

Vitamin E

It makes neurons "more flexible and less stressed," according to Michel Lejoyeux. It is found in wheat germ oil and sunflower oil, broccoli, spinach, tomatoes, walnuts and hazelnuts. It also contributes to

¹ *50 solutions plantes pour votre santé au quotidien*, by Dr. Eric Lorrain, ed. Taillandier (2016)

² *Tout déprimé est un bien portant qui s'ignore*, by Pr. Michel Lejoyeux, ed. JC Lattès (2016)

³ *Bien dans son assiette, bien dans sa tête*, by Dr. Stéphane Clerget, ed. Fayard (2016)

the production of serotonin. There is nothing like sunbathing and eating salmon and sardines to replenish your batteries.

The squirrel diet

Women suffering from PMS-related depression have much lower melatonin levels. Stéphane Clerget therefore advises them to consume nuts and hazelnuts, rich in this sleep hormone, in the time before their period.

Magnesium and calcium

These two elements are essential in the fight against depression. Specialists can easily explain it: magnesium is a cofactor of the enzyme that makes serotonin and calcium activates this same enzyme. Hence the interest in eating chocolate, whole grains and almonds, as well as dairy products, sunflower and sesame seeds, and nuts.

Happiness is in nature

Michel Lejoyeux advises to favour times spent in nature. He relates that an English researcher had an original idea: "He compared consumption of antidepressants between London boroughs with more or fewer trees. The results were irrevocable: the more trees, the less the inhabitants consumed antidepressants."

The Mozart effect

Music softens the morals...and the blues. "The most regular and troubling euphoric action is what is called the Mozart effect," says Professor Lejoyeux. And the most "prescribed" piece as an antidepressant is the "Sonata for two pianos K448". It is not at all like a placebo. Research shows an objective action on the brain. "Two other pieces act on neurons and good mood: Bach's *Italian Concerto* and Arcangelo Corelli's *Concerto grosso for piano*," adds the psychiatrist, who advises to devote fifty minutes a day to listening to them.

Yoga, a source of joy

Yoga is an effective way to combat depression, as it affects not only the head, but also the body. It causes dark thoughts and physical pain. For Dr. Lionel Coudron⁴, doctor and yoga teacher, a regular yoga practice "allows to act as much on the body, by bringing back positive and pleasant sensations, as on pessimistic irrational thoughts". Thanks to certain postures, he explains that one immediately feels a new energy, which will circulate throughout the body and give "the desire to act", as well as a feeling of pleasure.

⁴ *Yoga-thérapie, soigner la dépression*, by Dr. Lionel Coudron, ed. Odile Jacob (2018)