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# *Feel Good Factor*

## THE NATURAL ALTERNATIVE

Doctors in the UK may soon be prescribing exercise as a way of combating mood and fitness challenges. Life and business coach **Mark Shields** asks: How will this affect the role of medication? Can we do more to maintain and sustain our own mood and feeling good, without relying on medication that brings a list of side effects?

**R**ECENT reports from the US have suggested a large increase in prescribing antidepressants. Between 1996 and 2005, the rate of antidepressant treatment increased from 5.84% to 10.12%, or from an estimated 13.3 million to 27 million individuals. This situation is likely to have got even worse since 2005. Anti-depressants are now the most commonly prescribed class of medications in the United States.

Unfortunately, the UK seems to be following the same trend with a suggested 12 million prescriptions written for anti-depressant drugs in the UK each year. According to research at London University

and Warwick University the incidence of depression among young people has doubled in the past 12 years.

Obesity levels are rising and particularly within the younger community, stress and mood disorders are increasing.

People who are suffering from these challenges often seek comfort in food and alcohol to help avoid or mask the original cause of the problem. In the long term this can just exacerbate their symptoms.

The use of anti-depressants in society today causes a mixed reaction. They can help millions of people every year - but what else could we do to help ourselves, before they become necessary?

Doctors are now looking at prescribing exercise regimes by prescription, as without doubt this form of action is beneficial to our health and well-being. Many people that would benefit from this prescription have not taken advantage of it hitherto because of a lack of finance, time and motivation.

However, exercise and healthy eating need not be expensive.

In addition to this, nutrition can offer further improvement in one's condition. But it is not a quick fix or a one-off time in your life for temporary change. This régime needs to be a permanent life change, and you need to make a fundamental change on how you want to continue to live a better and more fulfilling existence.

Evidence from studies show us that regular exercise, reducing our caffeine intake, and taking supplements such as 5 HTP and omega 3 fish oil can help. Also psychotherapy and a low GL diet (to maintain correct blood sugar level balance) play an important role in helping balance our mood.

Over the last few years we have seen a decline in our vegetable intake (rich in folic acid), and fish intake (rich in essential fats) coupled with a dramatic increase in the amount of sugar consumption (from 2lbs a year in the 1940's to 150lbs a year in many of today's teenagers). This has had a dramatic impact on our mood and how we feel every day.

Take the case with today's youth. No wonder there are more 'Kevin and Perry' types about these days. Television advertising that promotes unhealthy food options, social trends like binge drinking and computer games, and peer group pressure all influence the teenagers of today more than ever before.

### **So how does food affect mood?**

Each of the nutrients lacking in modern society's diet that are found in vegetables and fish are strongly linked to depression - and could, theoretically, contribute to increasing rates of depression. If depression is an imbalance in biochemistry in the brain, it makes sense to explore how the brain normalises this, using nutrients as the precursors for key neurotransmitters such as serotonin. The brain is structurally and functionally completely dependent on nutrients, and as stress depletes nutrients by increasing this intake, we should counterbalance this situation.

Another important factor that underpins how we feel is poor control of blood sugar levels. The symptoms associated with low blood sugar are tiredness, agitation, irritability, poor concentration and insomnia. This is because the brain depends on a constant balance of blood sugar and the food we eat directly affects this balance.

A diet high in sugar and refined carbohydrates such as white bread causes sharp fluctuations in blood sugar leading to mood disorders. It also impacts on the important enzyme functions required to take place in the body in order for energy production known as ATP. This is essential for the body to live and function; without it, cells would die and systems would shut down.

Sugar depletes B vitamins that are key in the production and balance of the brain's neurotransmitters and serotonin.

### **Natural antidepressants without the side effects**

Serotonin is produced from 5HTP by the addition of carboxylase. This process relies heavily on the production of vitamins B12 and B6. People suffering from depression or mood related disorders tend to be deficient in B vitamins. Vitamin B complex and 5HTP can be found in most health shops.

Another famous natural supplement that is said to increase and sustain serotonin levels in the brain is St John's Wort. Again this is commonly found in health food stores. It is important to note at this stage you should always seek advice from your GP if you are taking any prescription medication before embarking on any alternatives.

### **Adrenalin and Exercise**

Stress hormones such as adrenaline and noradrenalin play a big part in how we handle and manage day-to-day stress and anxiety. When we become stressed and anxious, the body releases adrenalin to combat the stressful situation in which we find ourselves. In extreme cases we resort to the 'fight or flight' syndrome, whereby adrenaline levels rise dramatically and our senses become heightened to help us deal with the problem we are faced with.

If one were constantly under a situation of stress this would mean the body would be in a constant state of red alert and high anxiety. It would suffer an inability to relax, butterflies in the tummy, a feeling of impending doom, excessive sweating and insomnia and eventually would become exhausted.

Furthermore, people suffering with anxiety use stimulants such as coffee and cigarettes to counteract the symptoms, but the caffeine in coffee and nicotine in cigarettes only aggravates the situation by increasing the adrenaline.

Exercise is vital in keeping adrenaline levels under control. Exercise produces endorphins that directly combat adrenalin. Think of endorphins as the water that directly dampens the flame of adrenaline. Twenty minutes of cardio-vascular exercise is what I recommend every day to combat stress and anxiety. So we can see why the orthodox community of doctors are now looking into prescribing exercise as a remedy to all sorts of mood disorders.

### **Talking Therapies**

In my experience, adrenalin and stress levels are increased and maintained by how we approach our problems mentally. The more we think about our worries, the greater the problem seems to become and the worse we seem to feel. I call this "The Cognitive Thinking Dilemma".

How we think impacts directly on how we feel and subsequently on how we behave. This is where talking psychotherapy can be of enormous benefit. Talking therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy helps us challenge our thought processes on a regular basis and subsequently, as our thoughts change, so do our feelings and subsequent behaviours.

### **Summary**

So there we have it. All of the above play an enormous role in maintaining and sustaining a healthy mood. We are all different psychologically, but our body's requirements for nutrients follow the same pattern in order to function. If you think of your body as a car that functions on unleaded petrol, and you put in diesel, you know this will affect its function. Your body works in the same way and by putting in the correct balance of nutrients, you will achieve and positive outcome mentally and physically.

I am convinced if you take personal responsibility for your own state of mind and use some of the above methods, the pressure on our doctor's surgeries may ease and you may not need to visit it so often. Obviously, if in any doubt your GP is always your first port of call.