

Botanical Interventions in the Treatment of Psychoemotional Disorders

by Deborah Frances, RN, ND

Introduction

Standard medical treatments for mental health disorders frequently aim to eradicate so-called “deviant” mental processes and bring the affected patient back to “normal” reality. For example, various psychotropic drugs are administered to eliminate hallucinatory and delusional dysfunctions, pharmaceutical agents most commonly used in the treatment of schizophrenia work by blocking dopamine receptors, bipolar disease is generally treated with lithium carbonate, while anxiety disorders and depression call for different classes of medications and severe psychotic depression may still be treated with electroconvulsive therapy.

What these approaches all have in common, besides a wide array of undesirable side effects, is that they interfere with and block the process that is happening within the individual patient’s psyche. In this way, the conventional treatment of mental and emotional symptomatology is no different than the treatment of physical symptomatology. The process of the body, or the psyche, either one, is seen as potentially destructive and certainly disruptive, and is accordingly suppressed.

Vis Medicatrix Naturae. . . The Healing Power of Nature

This profound yet basic philosophy reminds us to trust in nature, trust the Body, and the immaterial Spirit that gives life, breath and vitality to the organism and the healing process. Rather than view symptoms as the irritating and dangerous manifestations of a hopelessly confused organism, it behooves us to view symptoms as the organism’s attempt to heal itself. To truly facilitate that healing we must support the process rather than suppress it. The task of the clinician is the same as with any patient—to facilitate the patient’s process without judgment or suppression.

Jungian analyst, Janet O. Dallett, writes in her book, *When the Spirits Come Back*:

THE PSYCHE KNOWS HOW TO HEAL ITSELF. . . what we have to do is pay attention and take seriously the processes the psyche initiates, the language and images it gives us. Other times and places have been more connected to spiritual realities that (the so called psychotic) has experienced. . . Ancient religious mysteries, contemporary mysticism, and so called primitive people all know about death and rebirth, the dark night of the soul, transformation, vision quest, shamanic initiation. These are the ways, the languages and images of spiritual reality, that inform the psyche’s self healing.

Psychiatrist, R.D. Laing, writes in his preface to the *The Divided Self*:

Psychiatry could be, and some psychiatrists are, on the side of transcendence, of genuine freedom, and of true human growth. But psychiatry can so easily be a technique of brain washing, or inducing behavior that is adjusted. . . our normal adjusted state is too often the abdication of ecstasy, the betrayal of our true potentialities. . .”

Within this framework, psychosis becomes an initiation, a sacred journey, that offers an extraordinary opportunity to claim previously unintegrated parts of the self, parts often not only rejected personally, but socially, by the codes and values of the predominant culture. The self, the vital force, the soul, if you will, pushes each of us ever onward toward wholeness, with little regard for cultural taboos or delicacies. The psychologist, Carl Jung, addresses this repeatedly in his works. In *Memories, Dreams & Reflections*, he writes:

. . . the unconscious and dreams (are) natural processes to which no arbitrariness can be attributed. . . I knew no reasons for the assumption that tricks of consciousness can be extended to the natural processes of the unconscious. On the contrary, daily

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experience taught me what intense resistance the unconscious opposes to the tendencies of the conscious mind.

Botanical Medicines

Nervines and adaptogens, with their calming, centering qualities and their propensity to nourish and rebuild the nervous system, the primary affected organ in these cases, are essential allies in the treatment of psychoemotional disorders.

Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*) Valerian has a balancing and regulatory effect on the autonomic nervous system. It is a specific for the treatment of insomnia, where it reduces the time taken to fall asleep. Its bitter qualities stimulate and tonify the digestive system as well as the nervous system, causing, in some cases, a reverse effect of overstimulation. Experience in clinic, however, has revealed Valerian to be an invaluable aid in soothing the frantic condition of the acute or chronic psychotic state. A strong warrior by nature, Valerian gets in and gets things calmed down where a gentler herb alone may not have the clout. Grieve tells us that there is an old recipe for Valerian which states, "Peace will be made immediately if given to men who begin to fight when you wish them to stop," indicating that Valerian may be helpful as an adjunct where the tendency to violence is part of the patient's state. Lad says Valerian contains a large amount of Earth element, making it very grounding, a definite issue in psychiatric disorders, where the spirit is often fragmented and the soul scattered, being anywhere but grounded in the body.

Passion flower (*Passiflora incarnata*) Passiflora is more specifically indicated when the symptoms are rooted in deep grief or wounds to the heart, or in cases where actual palpitations occur. Fears and paranoias may be accompanied by an angst that is more heartrending to the patient than the cold intellectual anxiety of the Hops (*Humulus lupulus*) type. Used together with Valerian, a balancing of male (valerian) and female (passiflora) energies is encouraged within the primary affected organ, the nervous system. This is beneficial, as again, these cases often demonstrate a deep fragmentation of spirit, with an exaggerated sense of duality.

Milky oats (*Avena sativa*) Many of these patients are not eating well, so whenever a nutritive herb can be included as beneficial, it should be considered. Avena is certainly one of these plants. Rich in a wide array of nutrients, Avena is a wonderful nerve tonic, gentle yet reliable. It is said that Avena can bring focus to the scattered mind that jumps from one subject to the next (Boericke). It also has a reputation for being helpful in breaking addictions to various drugs. Useful as a tonic after debilitating disease, Avena may be indicated after an acute crisis, as in the more convalescent stages of psychosis or mania.

St. John's Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) Hypericum has a wide reputation as a regenerative nerve tonic for both psychiatric and neurologic conditions. It is directly calming to limbic system (Sherman) and, as numerous studies have shown, is a powerful adjunct in mild to moderate depression. For more severe deep dark depressions, Black cohosh (*Actaea racemosa* syn *Cimicifuga racemosa*) is usually better indicated, though the two work well together. Hypericum, named for the Greek Titan, Hyperion, God of the Sun, has a strong relationship with the sun. In some sensitive persons or in very high doses taken internally, it is known to cause photosensitivity reactions, yet it is used topically as a mild sunscreen and again for sunburn. Its perforated leaves allow sun to shine through, just as the plant taken internally brings the sun into those sad depressed places. Even the flowers are the color of the sun - a beautiful bright yellow.

Grieve says the name Hypericum is a Greek word meaning "over an apparition", in reference to the belief that the herb was so obnoxious to evil spirits that a mere whiff of it would cause them to fly off. In shamanic cultures, where states of psychoses are viewed as a state of possession by evil spirits, this herb might be given. Such a point of view may seem superstitious and archaic to the modern practitioner, but this is largely a problem of semantics. What the old writers and shamanic cultures describe as "evil spirits" or demons can be defined in modern terms, quite accurately, as negative thought forms or emotional states coming either from within the patient's own psyche or from strong projections outside of the



Burdock (*Arctium lappa*)

patient. Terry Clifford in his book, *Tibetan Buddhist Medicine & Psychiatry*, writes, "Demons are primarily a psychological phenomenon associated with a multitude of mental and emotional obscurations. . . learned Tibetans. . . regard (demons) as mental entities or projections, mostly of the lower order, or as psychic fields of force, either natural or contrived."

Whether it is due to the basic nature of the human mind or the nature of these mental energies themselves, there is a tendency to personification that is well described by psychologist Carl Jung as archetypal. Such personification is not without value. It is part of the language of dreaming and of the mythological realm. It is the realm in which the psychotic, for example, dwells without boundary or guidance. Understanding and accepting this symbolic language can help us to better understand not only our patients, but also much of the herbal literature of times past.

Black Cohosh (*Actaea racemosa* syn. *Cimicifuga racemosa*) Specific indications for black cohosh include a deep dark depression, a sensation of a black cloud that may descend suddenly out of nowhere and a feeling of wildness in the mind with an inability to focus. These are terrible states as are often seen in certain types of psychosis where the mental chaos and paranoia parallel the literature's indications of mental wildness. Like the root of the plant that is used, these patients are too far underground for the sun to reach no matter how much hypericum one gives. High doses of black cohosh may be required, in acute states, even 60 drops every 2 hours or oftener in severe states. Patients should be monitored closely for symptoms of toxicity including a dull frontal headache that can progress to a pounding headache, muscle weakness, nausea, vomiting, and eventually lowered blood pressure and heart rate. In patients for whom the herb is well indicated, however, toxic symptoms are not generally encountered even at these doses. Alternatively, in some patients frequent doses of 2-5 drops may be all that is required.

Cimicifuga is known largely for its work with women's hormonal cycles. While it is an

invaluable plant for the depression or difficulty in focusing that can accompany PMS or menopausal symptoms, it is by no means only a women's herb. Neither is it indicated only for those states brought on by hormonal imbalances; we must take care not to become limited in our knowledge and uses of herbal medicines. *Actaea racemosa* proves helpful in these states, even when hormones are not involved.

Kava (*Piper methysticum*) Used traditionally as a sacred ceremonial herb in the South Sea Islands, *Piper methysticum* is said to invoke higher states of consciousness and increased openness in social gatherings or important meetings. Experience in the clinic reveals that piper has an ability to lift one out of a deep chaotic emotional state of either anxiety or depression to a place of clearer vision and centeredness. It not only calms but actually lifts the patient to a different place. It is specifically indicated for patients who have done their inner work, taken the "dark night of the soul" journey as it were, yet cannot break free of the angst. Piper seems to calm the anxiety or ease the depression by lifting the patient up and out, releasing them from the hold of the underworld in which they are caught. When visions are dark, chaotic and confused, Piper lifts the patient up, bringing truer visions and more mental clarity. It works well with black cohosh which, in its clearing action, cleanses the way for the patient to be lifted up.

Piper can induce a mild feeling of peace and euphoria. Part of its ability to uplift may be linked to the fact that it moves thinking from a linear processing of information to a greater sense of being and understanding where there is more capacity to flow and let be. Its traditional uses to bring increased openness in social settings suggests it may be a helpful adjunct in addressing the deep seated paranoia so many schizophrenic patients experience.

Piper methysticum can be toxic in prolonged or high dosage. A side effect of prolonged use is yellow, dry, rough skin which is reversed when the herb is discontinued; large doses can cause dilated pupils and unsteady gait. Potentially hepatotoxic, liver enzymes should be monitored in patients on long-term kava prescriptions. This

plant works very well in small doses. Two to five drops given frequently may be more effective than higher doses given only three to four times a day in some cases.

Gotu kola (*Centella asiatica*) Centella is considered in Ayurvedic medicine to be a main herb for revitalizing brain and nervous tissue, improving the ability to concentrate, bringing more calmness and clarity and enhancing memory. Lad (*The Yoga of Herbs*) says it balances the right and left hemispheres of the brain, a definite issue in bipolar and schizophrenic states. It is used by yogis to enhance meditations and awaken the crown chakra. Centella also strengthens immune and adrenal function, increasing the body's ability to adapt to stress.

Devil's club (*Oplopanax horridum*) A member of the Araliaceae family, Oplopanax has been traditionally used by Northwest Native Americans as a protective warrior totem. It stands three to ten feet tall, with soft leaves that are mindful of the thimbleberry plant. Unlike the gentle thimbleberry, however, Oplopanax is covered with sharp, spiny thorns, from the bottom of the stem to the tip of the furthest leaf. Experience in clinic reveals Oplopanax to possess an ability to bring an increased sense of self confidence, strength, and courage to anxiety ridden patients. When 5 ml of the tincture is added to a one ounce preparation of Rescue Remedy, in lieu of the usual brandy, a significant difference is noted. Patients report, in repeated instances, that while plain Rescue Remedy brings a sense of calmness, the addition of Oplopanax brings a sense of empowerment with greatly increased confidence. One woman described a feeling of being able to "pull it together" and take charge of her life that went beyond the calmness she'd felt with plain Rescue Remedy for her acute anxiety states. Oplopanax is known to be regulatory to blood sugar, often an issue in any emotionally symptomatic patient. One colleague reported a case in which the shift to a hypoglycemic diet totally cleared a young man's longstanding schizophrenic symptoms, illustrating the importance of addressing nutritional issues in these, as in all cases.

Like other members of the Araliaceae family,

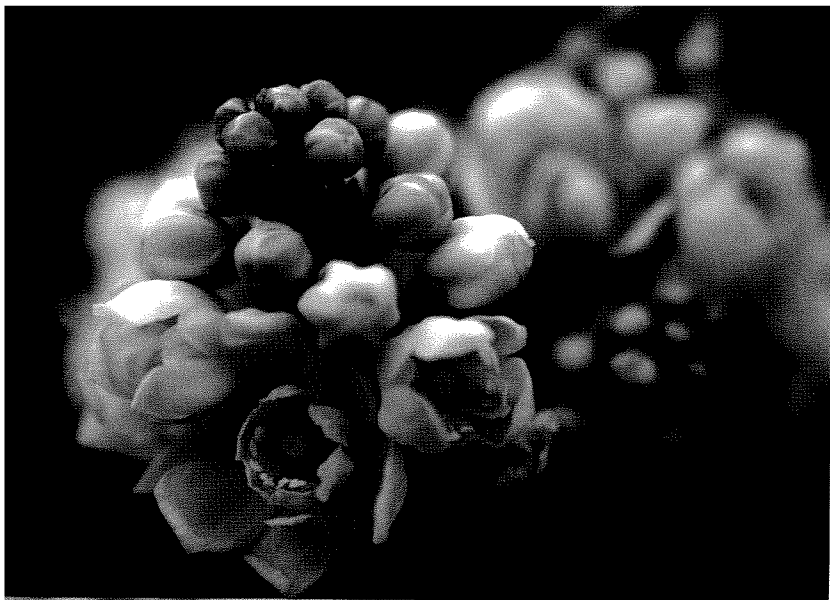
Oplopanax possesses adaptogenic abilities, increasing the body's ability to withstand stress. Other adaptogenic herbs, such as Eleutherococcus (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*) and licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) may be considered, Glycyrrhiza also being noted for its ability to regulate blood sugar and protect hepatocytes. *Panax ginseng* may be considered for the more catatonic, depressed, or indolent cases and should perhaps be avoided where stimulation is undesirable.

Martin Wall



Passion flower (*Passiflora incarnata*)

Liver and Gastrointestinal Herbs Decreased mental clarity, confusion, restlessness, agitation, anger, or varying degrees of depression may all be aggravated or caused by a stressed metabolic system. For this reason, it is vital to address liver and kidney function in any patient suffering from symptoms in the mental/emotional spheres. Addressing digestion, including poor digestion, malabsorption and constipation, can significantly contribute to symptom improvement. The health of the digestive tract is key to the uptake and assimilation of nutrients, the groundwork of any healing process. Herbs to consider include, Dandelion root (*Taraxacum officinale*), Bupleurum (*Bupleurum falcatum*), Orgeon grape root (*Berberis aquifolium*), Milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*), Artichoke (*Cynara scolymus*),

Oregon Grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*)

Celandine (*Chelidonium majus*), Juniper (*Juniperis communis*), Gentian (*Gentiana lutea*). Alteratives such as Burdock (*Arctium lappa*), Red clover (*Trifolium pratense*), Cleavers (*Galium aparine*), and Nettles (*Urtica dioica*) may also prove useful in the improving the healing process. In addition, these latter herbs are high in nutrients, always a consideration in patients who are often irregular with their diets.

Specific Herbs

The number of botanical medicines that may be used in the treatment of psychoemotional disorders is as vast and varied as the herbalists who use them. The following are a few that have proven effective in the clinic.

Sagebrush (*Artemesia tridentata*) Used as a “smudge” by Native Americans to help clear negative energies from a person, place or object, sagebrush is deeply cleansing and antidepressant.

Like its close relative wormwood (*Artemesia absinthium*) it is also antiparasitic. Matthew Wood in his chapter on sagebrush in *Seven Herbs: Plants As Teachers*, describes sagebrush as being specifically indicated for patients who feel caught in no win situations or who feel split within themselves. The author has found this plant to be invaluable for those patients who feel that certain objects, most commonly electronic equipment, are the source of evil voices or bugging devices. This is a common perception among schizophrenics. The use of sagebrush smoke passed over the objects on a regular basis can be an enormous help in clearing this problem. Inhalation of the volatile oils given off in the smoke directly affects the limbic system via olfactory nerve pathways. Thus, the antidepressant effects of smudging with the herb cannot be underestimated in these cases. More than one patient has reported back to the author that this simple remedy, done regularly, proved helpful in the depression and in two cases the patients felt it was the most helpful thing offered to them for their condition.

Juniper (*Juniperis communis*) The berries of juniper, commonly used as a kidney tonic and urinary disinfectant, are considered protective by many Native Americans, as are many plants with strong volatile oils. Juniper’s protection is provided in part by its ability to encourage discrimination, a function of the kidneys, interestingly enough. In prescribing juniper for acute urinary tract infections, one must take care to discriminate between cystitis, where it is well indicated, and pyelonephritis, where it can cause harm. As American herbalist and naturopathic physician Dr. Jill Stansbury pointed out to the author, even the harvesting of the berries requires discrimination, the berries taking two to three years to ripen so that both ripe and unripe berries are found on the same plant. In one case in clinic, a man in an acute schizophrenic episode who was experiencing an invasion of troublesome voices (again not uncommon in these cases) was given juniper berries, not to take internally, but to hold on his person, in a pocket or pouch to ground the medicine of discrimination after shamanic work had been done to bring back that part of his soul that could help him discriminate. The results were heartening. After three weeks of carrying the juniper berries, in

conjunction with the soul retrieval, the patient reported, "You know, not all these voices are bad. Some are good helpful voices!"

Flower Essences

Flower essences, with their specific actions on the emotional sphere, should always be considered in these cases. Yarrow, specific for people who are too open to outside influences, either psychic or physical, may be a great adjunct. Rescue remedy, the composite remedy of the Bach Flowers, can be enormously helpful for acute panic and terror. Clematis for the vacant, staring states; gorse and mustard and sweet chestnut might be considered for deep despair, depression and anguish. Oregon grape and aspen are said to be helpful in states of paranoia and white chestnut can prove valuable in shielding out unwanted negative voices. Cherry plum may be useful for the feelings of desperation and fear of going insane. Agrimony, both herbally and as a flower essence, helps with the inner torment and feelings of torture in cases where those symptoms are present. These are but a few of the many flower essences available to practitioners.

Herb Drug Interactions

While this paper does not directly address the treatment of patients on allopathic psychiatric drugs, a cautionary note is warranted. The interaction of allopathic drugs and plant medicines is still largely a sea of uncharted waters. Close monitoring of patients is most certainly warranted, with initial dosing of herbs being extremely conservative, perhaps even drop doses, increasing at slow increments, if there is any reason to suspect a possible negative interaction. Research into specific herb-drug interactions is critical, and a close working relationship with the prescribing physician is certainly the ideal.

Conclusion

The plant medicines available to the herbal practitioner for the treatment of severe emotional states are vast and effective. While some cases may respond well to a good herbal program with attention to nutrition and other lifestyle patterns, it is important to take note that in addition to spiritual healing and herbal interventions, other therapies such as chiropractic, craniosacral,


homeopathy, psychotherapy, nutritional supplementation, or acupuncture may also be indicated.

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