Nutritional Approaches to Depression

By Sherry Dell, PhD, CN
Certified Nutritionist

Have you ever felt depressed? It's a bit shocking to think about, but I can't think of anyone I've ever met personally or professionally who could answer "no" to that question. Yikes! I guess it shouldn't be too surprising since statistics tell us that one out of five Americans suffers from serious depression. Statistics also tell us that people born after 1940 are much more likely to become depressed than people who were born before 1940. In other words, the baby boomers are the first in history to suffer depression at these kinds of levels. What changed after 1940 to affect us all so negatively?

It's my proposition that the quality of our food changed. It has changed in our agricultural practices and in our own food choices. But let me tell you how I have come to this conclusion. I was born in Iowa to a family of a long line of farmers. My parents, grandparents and great grandparents had all farmed in this little community long before I arrived. So when I began to question the links between food and mood, I talked to my family about what they knew and this is what they told me. Before World War II, farming in Iowa was accomplished without any chemical applications. No herbicides, fungicides, chemical fertilizers were ever used. In fact, until the 1940's not even gas powered tractors or other farm machinery came in contact with my family's fields. Crops were planted using horses and plows and crops were rotated annually to help keep the production high and the fields healthy. After World War II, all that changed. All manner of chemicals began to be routinely applied to every field and rotation was eliminated. My Dad talks about the absence of bird and animal life in the fields after spraying chemicals began. He remembers watching the birds and rabbits die in the field.

Now on top of this dramatic change in the quality of our food, add to it the dramatic change in the American lifestyle. Rush, rush, rush and grab a bite to eat when you can; maybe a cookie or cup of coffee to tied you over. Sound familiar? The problem is, we tend to be "tiding ourselves over" all the time. And we tend to be sitting in artificially lit offices, separated from friends and family, while we do it. Year in, year out. But what's worse, our children are also living this way, even as they are trying to grow bodies. This leaves them without the necessary biochemical building blocks for optimal human functioning. Oh boy, now I'm starting to feel depressed.

But how do you know if you're depressed or just feeling down? Feeling blue from time to time and being depressed are not the same thing. Depression is a disorder and not a normal state for the human body. A depressed mind sounds something like this on the inside: "I'm so tired all the time… I just can't take any of this…I need to get out of here but there's nowhere to go… No one understands how I feel… Nothing matters any more, nothing… Everything seems so hard… I wish I could just sleep all day… I'm so lonely but nobody cares…

Technically there are two types of depression: reactive and endogenous. Reactive depression happens as a result of an isolated event such as a death experience, a marital upset, or a financial problem. People who have this kind of depression usually get better over time and can benefit from psychotherapy. People with endogenous depression don't usually benefit from psychotherapy. These are the people who may find that brain biochemistry is involved. And brain biochemistry is something that nutrition can help. You may have depression of a biochemical origin if the following conditions seem to fit your case: [•]

- You've been depressed for a long time even though circumstance have changed in your life
- Psychotherapy seems to have no effect
- You don't react to good news
- You awaken very early in the morning and can't get back to sleep

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[•] from Seven Weeks to Emotional Healing, Joan Mathews Larson, PhD

- You can't trace the beginning of your depression to any particular life event
- Drinking alcohol makes your depression worse the next day

In addition to my own intuition regarding the nutritional connection to depression, research[•] now tells us many of the causes of endogenous depression can be treated effectively with nutritional and other natural protocols. These include:

- Neurotransmitter depletion
- Essential fatty acid deficiencies in the brain
- Vitamin and mineral deficiencies or dependencies
- Hypothyroidism
- Hypoglycemia
- Brain allergy or sensitivity reactions to food or airborne chemicals
- Systemic buildup of fungal molds and candida yeast
- Histadelia (abnormally elevated histamine levels)
- Build up of heavy metals in the brain

Clearly, the trick is finding out which one or which combination of these causes might be related to your own symptoms. This often requires specialized blood, urine, hormone, digestive, or hair tests. So ultimately, you will want to find a practitioner who can help you do this detective work. But let me give you a simplistic overview of some of the nutritional options available for these kinds of imbalances.

Let me begin with some general nutritional suggestions and my own story. As I said, I grew up in a farm family. This meant I was blessed with a mother who stayed at home and cooked 3 square meals a day, as they were called. And I am eternally grateful to her for all her hard work on my behalf. These meals consisted of meat, potatoes, gravy, canned vegetables, and desert. As a nutritionist, I can look back now and clearly see that certain nutrients were missing. But I must say the biggest problem was the desert. My sweet tooth was well established from as early as I can remember. And I fed it well. By the time I was 20, I suffered terrible hypoglycemic episodes on a regular basis.

I also suffered depression or what I would have called "a lot of sadness and a lot of tears." Depression per se was never diagnosed (the National Institute of Mental Health has said that up to 70 percent of people suffering from depression fail to seek treatment). At age 31, I changed my diet and an amazing thing happened (actually LOTS of amazing things happen, but that's another story); I began to perceive that I had been living under a pervasive black cloud and then before I knew it, that black cloud lifted. And I knew--it would never come back again.

I didn't know at the time that the black cloud was related to my diet, but I do now. Not only did my food choices change but I also began to understand the importance of organic food. Organic food is our best solution to counteract the change in the quality of our mass produced agricultural products. So in a nutshell, this is how my diet changed:

- **Protein:** Get some at every meal but limit red meats (beef, pork) and processed meats (cold cuts, hot dogs, etc.) and increase seeds, nuts, dried beans, turkey, fish, chicken.
- **Carbohydrate (Fiber):** Limit or preferably eliminate simple carbohydrates (candy bars, cookies, pasta, white breads, white potatoes, etc.), and increase high fiber carbohydrates (legumes such as pinto, garbanzo, black, white beans, etc. and vegetables and un-processed whole grains).
- **Essential Fats:** Avoid the bad fats (saturated, trans fatty acids such as red meats and fried foods) and increase the good fats (omega 3 and 6 fatty acids such as fish, olive oil, flax seed oil, cod liver oil).

[•] In addition to Larson's work cited above, read Depression and Natural Medicine, Rita Elkins, Fighting Depression, Harvey Ross, MD, Biobalance: Acid-Alkaline Nutrition to Solve the Food-Mood Health Puzzle, Rudolf Wiley, or The Food-Mood-Body Connection, Gary Null.

Now, here are some more specific nutritional interventions for the wide variety of causes of biochemical depression. Remember, this is just the overview and not meant to be a prescription for your specific case.

There are two major neurotransmitters involved in preventing depression and they are serotonin (which is converted in the body from the amino acid tryptophan) and norepinephrine (which is converted in the body from the amino acids L-phenylaline and L-tyrosine). Prozac, Zoloft and Paxil are all popular prescription drugs that try to reverse depression by blocking the uptake of serotonin back into the neurotransmitters, which basically traps your original levels in the brain to be used over and over. A more natural approach to neurotransmitter depletion is the supplementation to the diet of the amino acids or proteins that are the source of these neurotransmitters. This sounds simple enough, but you will need to know which amino acid is most appropriate for you and this may require some testing. In general, symptoms that indicate a need for more serotonin include sleeplessness, anxiety, irritability and nervous depression. Symptoms that indicate a need for more norepinephrine include lethargy, fatigue, sleeping too much, and feelings of immobility.

The brain is over 60 percent fat, which basically means that essential fatty acids are extremely essential in preventing depression. And in fact, both serotonin and norepinephrine need essential fatty acids to fire or communicate effectively in the brain to prevent depression. Again, there are specific tests available to test your essential fatty acid levels, but you can begin to tell if you're deficient if you suffer from dry skin, dandruff, dry hair, brittle nails, "chicken skin" on the backs of arms, dry eyes, poor wound healing and much more. To increase essential fatty acids in the diet, increase your consumption of fish, add flax oil as food (but don't cook with it), and consider taking cold-water fish oil capsules.

The brain can also be deficient in other nutrients that can lead to depression, anger, listlessness, and paranoia. For example, B vitamins are used up by the intake of refined sugars, nicotine, caffeine, and alcohol as well as stress. B vitamins are water-soluble, which means the body does not store up excess levels. In other words, B complex needs to be supplied to the body on a daily basis. It also means that they are completely safe for the body because you simply cannot overdose on the B complex vitamins. In addition to the B vitamins, deficiencies in the minerals magnesium, calcium, zinc, iron, manganese and potassium have all been linked to depression. Minerals can accumulate in the body, so it's best that these levels be checked and monitored.

Hypoglycemia is a condition that arises when your body has too little glucose to fuel the brain. The cause of hypoglycemia is the consumption of too much junk food and in particular, too much sugar. The symptoms of hypoglycemia mirror the symptoms of depression very closely and include nervousness, irritability, exhaustion, drowsiness, insomnia, constant worry, mental confusion, rapid pulse, internal trembling, forgetfulness, headaches, and unprovoked anxieties. Protein and fiber are the second best nutritional solutions to hypoglycemia. The first, of course, is to stop consuming high sugar, junk food diets.

Heavy metals such as cadmium, lead, and copper can accumulate in the brain and cause symptoms like personality changes, confusion, mind racing, violence a d hallucinations. Mercury in particular has been linked to depression. If you have dental amalgams or silver fillings in your teeth, you have these heavy metals in your body. They may or may not have accumulated in tissue over time based on the biochemical uniqueness of your body. Hair analysis tests are a good, economical way to check for heavy metal accumulation. Nutritional protocols that include sulfur, vitamin C, selenium, and many more nutrients can help the body to begin to release heavy metals.

I hope this information is beginning to give you a sense of the many natural and nutritional options for those suffering with depression. In many cases, these kinds of approaches will be the only viable solutions for endogenous, biochemically-based, chronic depression. You can feel completely safe in beginning to improve your diet as outlined here, but talk to your practitioner about the specific options that might be best for you.