

# Evaluating alternative treatments as an option

**Many people decide to try alternative methods of managing their depression or anxiety. This is understandable, especially for those who don't like using drugs, or prefer not to see a doctor or counsellor.**

For people whose depression or anxiety is not severe or life-threatening, there are a lot of options that can be tried and may be helpful in managing depression, or preventing it getting worse. Some of these, for example, physical activity, are known to be helpful and can also be good in addition to medical treatment and/or talking therapy.

While some non-medical treatments can be helpful, others may be harmful. For example, a lot of people 'self-medicate' by using alcohol and other drugs, and this approach tends to make the depression worse. And in some of the across-the-counter remedies, such as St. John's Wort, can interact with other common drugs, so you should check with your doctor before taking them.

Some of the approaches that are known to be effective are increasing physical and social activity, developing problem solving skills, and getting enough sleep. See Fact Sheets 11, 12 and 13 to find out more about these options.

There are a lot of things you can do to make yourself feel better, and which help to keep you well. In fact pretty much anything you enjoy doing will make you feel better and improve your mood. Listening to music, gardening, shopping, playing sport, walking the dog, spending time with people you like – it's really important to take the time to enjoy these "little things" – they all help to protect you from getting depressed or anxious.

## If you want to talk to someone who can help:

Call the Depression Helpline on **0800 111 757**

Text The Lowdown team for free on **5626**

Or talk to your doctor

There has been research done about some alternatives to medical and psychological treatment, and the table overleaf provides you with the available evidence for them. It's important to understand that there are many things that haven't been researched properly that could still be effective, so this isn't a complete list. New evidence is coming forward all the time.

Evidence base of alternative treatments for depression<sup>1</sup>

Strong Evidence	Some Evidence	Lack of Evidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>St John's Wort (herb) for mild to moderate depression</li> <li>Physical activity/exercise</li> <li>Self-help books involving Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)</li> <li>Light therapy (for winter or seasonal depression)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acupuncture</li> <li>Light therapy (for non-seasonal depression)</li> <li>Massage therapy</li> <li>Relaxation therapy</li> <li>Folate</li> <li>Yoga breathing exercises</li> <li>Omega 3 (fish oil)</li> <li>Internet-based programmes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ginseng</li> <li>Lemon balm</li> <li>Painkillers</li> <li>Vervain (herbal remedy)</li> <li>Colour therapy</li> <li>Prayer</li> <li>Chocolate</li> </ul>

St John's Wort is a plant-based substance available without prescription from pharmacies and health shops. If you are taking St John's Wort, it's important to tell your doctor this, as it can react badly with other drugs including the contraceptive pill.

The evidence for omega-3 oils (fish oil) is not conclusive but it is promising, and it's unlikely to have any harmful effects.

Massage has an immediate effect on emotional state, but sustained effects on depression have not been demonstrated.

Self-help books ("bibliotherapy") have been shown to be beneficial for adults with mild to moderate depression, but there is less evidence of effectiveness for adolescents.

New evidence is emerging on the effectiveness of computer-based programmes that are based on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy or Problem Solving Therapy (see Fact Sheet 16), and these are becoming more widely available through the internet. There are several that are being developed and/or trialled in New Zealand.

There is also good evidence for physical activity and exercise, relaxation therapy, and self help books in the treatment and management of anxiety.

You may have to try a few options to see what works best for you. However, if at any stage depression or anxiety is getting the better of you and you feel overwhelmed, support is always available to you.

<sup>1</sup> Sources: Jorm AF, et al. two papers on the effectiveness of complementary and self-help treatments for depression, published in the Medical Journal of Australia, 2002 and 2006. NZ Guidelines Group. 'Identification of Common Mental Disorders and Management of Depression in Primary Care'. Ministry of Health 2008.

## + getting help

**If you want to talk to a trained counsellor about how you're feeling, or you've got any questions, you can:**

- **Call the Depression Helpline on 0800 111 757**
- **Text The Lowdown team for free on 5626**

They can listen to your story, and come up with ideas about what might help. They can also put you in touch with health professionals close to where you live, if that's what you want.

**Or for more information you can visit:**

**[www.depression.org.nz](http://www.depression.org.nz) or [www.thelowdown.co.nz](http://www.thelowdown.co.nz)**

The Ministry of Health would like to acknowledge information sourced from: NZ Mental Health Survey 2006, NZ Guidelines Group, Royal Australian and NZ College of Psychiatrists, MaGPIe Research Group, Beyond Blue (Australia).