

Mother Nurture

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Natural Antidepressants

I've been feeling down lately. Things that ought to be so nice are just blah, I'm really irritable, it's easy to get teary, and I feel SO worn out.

Because of the stresses and physical depletion that come – amidst all the wonderful parts! – with raising a family, about half of all mothers have significant feelings of sadness or depressed mood, and one in eight will go through a clinical depression. So if you are feeling blue, you are not alone.

Number one: Consider if you are clinically depressed, defined as experiencing five or more of these symptoms for two weeks or longer: depressed mood; loss of pleasure in things that used to be enjoyable; weight loss; insomnia or hypersomnia; intense restlessness or sluggishness; fatigue; strong feelings of worthlessness or guilt; hard to concentrate or make decisions; recurrent thoughts of death or suicide.

If you fulfill these criteria or even come close, please contact a therapist immediately. Counseling is the fundamental treatment for depression, with the most penetrating and enduring results.

Now, if your mood hasn't fallen so far into the pit, but it nonetheless robs you of joy at a time that should be so wonderful, still think about counseling for support and developing psychological skills for handling stress and painful feelings. And of course, there are many methods for self-help without a counselor that are terrifically effective, such as those we've discussed in many columns (easily accessed on www.NurtureMom.com). Further, our book, *Mother Nurture*, is truly a comprehensive resource for a mother's health, well-being, and teamwork and intimacy with her partner.

On this foundation of growing mental health, add sensible physical interventions, ranging from just eating protein with every meal (especially breakfast!) to perhaps talking with a physician about antidepressants. Medicines such as Prozac, Zoloft, etc. can be real lifesavers, but they are also a very serious intervention, often with significant side effects.

So a smart first step is often to try some or all of these research-proven natural antidepressants:

- A good multivitamin/multimineral supplement that entails four to six pills a day - Deficiencies in many nutrients will lower your mood, and bearing and rearing children is inherently depleting, so you have to keep refilling your tank.
- B-vitamin complex - One a day. Make sure it contains 800 micrograms of folic acid.

- B-12 - Take one a day sublingually (under the tongue)
- Omega-3 essential fatty acids (the “good fats” in fish oil) - Make sure they are "molecularly distilled" and take enough to get 500 mg/day of DHA (see the label)
- Calcium and Magnesium – Each day, take 1000 to 1500 milligrams of calcium and 400 milligrams of magnesium.
- Taurine – This amino acid helps soothe frazzled nerves (among other good things), but it is drained out of your body during both pregnancy and breastfeeding. Take 500 milligrams a day.

Basically, every mother should take the nutrients above each day. Additionally, you could try:

- 5-hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP) - The body builds serotonin - a key neurotransmitter regulating mood - from the amino acid, tryptophan, and the next-to-last step is 5-HTP. You can get this supplement in any health food store, and it has good research support for mild depression in adults. Different people benefit from different dosages and timing. Experiment with 25 - 150 mg./day, taken in the morning or evening or spread throughout the day. Start with a low dose, don't go past 200 mg./day unless you're working with a licensed health professional familiar with 5-HTP, and cut back if you start feeling drowsy or get nightmares.

You should also consider three, simple, standard medical lab tests:

- Iron - Probably at least one in ten mothers has a mood-related anemia
- Thyroid - This "master hormone" is frequently disturbed during pregnancy, a major source of postpartum depression and anxiety.
- Homocysteine - Besides being a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, high levels of this substance indicate a need for more B-vitamins, particularly B-12 and folic acid.

Honestly, this package of foundational mental health combined with serious nutritional support will lift most mothers' mood within a few weeks. And if it's just not enough, definitely talk with your physician about what else you might do. With everything that's known these days, there's just no reason for your baseline mood to be bad. Stick with it, don't let anyone talk you out of being good to yourself (including your own thoughts!), and YOU WILL FEEL BETTER.

(Rick Hanson, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist, Jan Hanson, M.S., L.Ac., is an acupuncturist/nutritionist, and they are raising a daughter and son, ages 15 and 18. With Ricki Pollycove, M.D., they are the first and second authors of Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships, published by

Penguin. You can see their website at www.nurturemom.com or email them with questions or comments at info@nurturemom.com; unfortunately, a personal reply may not always be possible.)