

Healing Depression: Integrated Naturopathic and Conventional Approaches

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The spectrum of depressive disorders is a major burden on the health care system. In fact, depression is so prevalent, it inhabits the number two position of societal morbidity, right after heart disease. Addressing this urgency for care, CCNM press has published a new book, *Healing Depression*, by Dr. Peter Bongiorno, ND.

Dr. Bongiorno brings his vast experience in his subject. He is co-director of InnerSource Natural Health and Acupuncture in New York City and Huntington, Long Island, and has researched neuroendocrinology at the National Institutes of Health and Yale University. He also attended Bastyr University for his naturopathic doctorate and acupuncture degrees; teaches at NYU; and lectures at Mount Sinai School of Medicine. Dr. Bongiorno's vast experience in this field has been poured into this foundational textbook designed to integrate naturopathic and conventional approaches to mental illness in general and depression in particular.

Healing Depression distills its subject into three broad areas: The nature of depression and its assessment; conventional treatments for depression; and naturopathic treatments and how they fit in with conventional therapy.

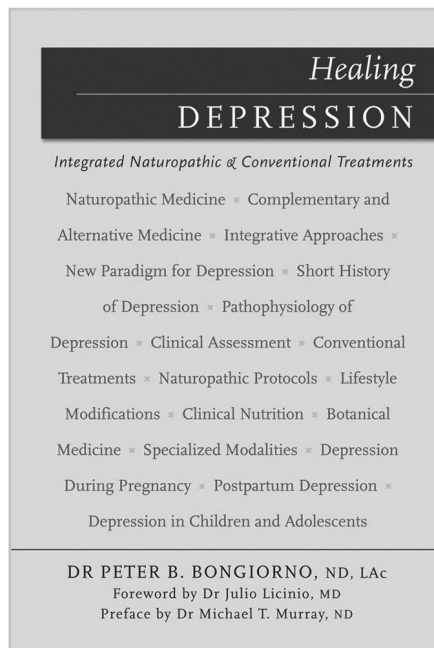
The first section begins with a chapter called "the new paradigm for depression," where Bongiorno lays out the shocking epi-

demology of the disorder, with 9% of our population suffering from some form of it, and an astonishing 1 in 5 women and 1 in 8 men disabled by it at some point in their lives. Definitions of naturopathic and integrative medicine are given which may dispel the confusion and overlap of these concepts. In short, naturopaths focus on lifestyle counselling, clinical nutrition, botanical medicine and homeopathy as well as the best of traditional medicine of other cultures. Integrative medicine involves the use of the best of conventional and naturopathic approaches that focuses on the whole person and reaffirms the importance of the relationship between patient and practitioner.

Bongiorno gives a short, fascinating history of human conceptions of depression, from antiquity and the middle ages, through the renaissance to the 17th and 18th century concepts of "melancholia" and on to the radical changes born of modern psychiatry of today. I found this historical survey very interesting in that it shows how radically concepts of wellness and illness change to suit the zeitgeist. Even en-

lightenment era science, for all its pretensions to reason, is subject to the personalities, politics and economics of the era. Change is again upon us, with the rise of naturopathy.

Healing Depression next goes on to correlate bipolar and unipolar depressions and their treatment with scales such as the DSM axes and the Hamilton, Beck and Edinburgh scales to assess post-partum depressions and the major unipolar subgroups such as psychotic, catatonic, melancholic and atypical. Covering the brain-body link in the pathophysiology section, we learn of the influence of GI-neuro-endocrine axis as there is considerable evidence that these linked



systems can have a profound influence on mood. The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axes also has a close relationship to depression as psychosocial stress has been shown to modify cortisol and low androgen and testosterone have an association with mood. Not to be forgotten in the puzzle of depression are common prescription drug interactions and the myriad of predisposing conditions and comorbidities such as cardiovascular and pulmonary diseases, musculo-skeletal disorders, diabetes, along with genetic and ethnic factors. This section ends with a discussion of the crucial importance of proper clinical assessment using intake questionnaires which run down specific scenarios with major condition, onset chronology, medications and exposures to toxicities. A ROS (review of systems) is needed to establish comorbidities and other factors at work and makes use of physical examination, imaging and laboratory markers, along with naturopathic tools such as traditional Chinese tongue and pulse diagnosis.

Section two of *Healing Depression* explains in depth the conventional approach to treating depression. At the top of the heap, as we would expect, are the vast array of prescribed drugs from selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI), to tricyclic antidepressants (TCA), to monoamine oxidase Inhibitors (MAO) to the newer atypicals like Wellbutrin and Trazedone. I appreciated that *Healing Depression* included a discussion of something you rarely hear in conventional medicine: exit strategies for prescriptions. This process is introduced along with the naturopathic substitutes which can act as sustainable replacement therapy. Planning how wean yourself off psychotropic drugs which are actually intended for short term use is essential information for patients and physicians. This section also reviews the many considerations for safe use including drug interactions, common side effects and their varying efficacies.

The curious difference between conventional medicine's disdain for placebo and the more positive naturopathic approach is a subject in itself. The very idea of a placebo may

our best example of the *vis medicatrix nature* or "healing power of nature" which is foundational to natural medicine. The strength of placebo correlates to the patient's belief in the power to heal themselves and the doctor's attitude to placebo can positively tip the body toward a healing path. Not forgotten are the many conventional approaches such as electroconvulsive therapy, to the newer and less invasive electrical therapies such as transcranial magnetic stimulation, vagus nerve stimulation, and deep brain stimulation. All of these therapies offer the advantage of sidestepping the great disadvantages of drugs—the cost, inconvenience and plethora of side effects most patients experience with pill cures. With the narrow focus of so many "health" books, I found Dr. Bongiorno's sober analysis of the contributions of conventional medicine provided a valuable and necessary context.

Section Three, compromising more than half of the book, goes into great detail on the spectrum of alternative treatments practiced by naturopaths. There are four broad areas beginning with lifestyle modifications which plays a core role in addressing the symptoms and causes of depression. One of the hardest tasks of the naturopath is education of the patient so they take responsibility for their health. Patients must be responsible for addressing the major issues nutritional such as caloric intake, protein-carb-fat balance and food allergies. Lesser known but equally important are good digestive habits, adequate hydration, sleep, sunlight and exercise.

The second area recognizes that even with proper corrective nutrition, some of us need more help to overcome age or inborn metabolic deficiencies. To address this, Bongiorno writes extensively on nutritional supplements such as essential fatty acids, amino acids, vitamins and minerals, hormones and neurotransmitters. This is the next natural line of correction after diet. The third leg of naturopathic healing after diet change and supplements is botanical medicine—which is used by so many for common ailments. Not surprisingly, the experience of centuries has uncovered many affective anti-depressants such as licorice, ginkgo, lavender, august-

folia, crocus sativus, yohimbe, salvia species, camellia sinensis and rhodolio rosea. Beyond plant medicine, are the specialized, supportive methods like homeopathy, traditional Chinese medicine, yoga, meditation, massage and cognitive therapies which may find resonance with particular patients.. Ending this section are several chapters discussing special, more episodic manifestations such as depression during pregnancy, postpartum depression and depression in adolescents and children. These are discussed in relation to causes, diagnoses and conventional medicine along with timely ideas on how naturopathic physicians can integrate this with natural modalities.

I found *Healing Depression* to be one of the most comprehensive and well researched texts for the practicing naturopath and its accessible writing makes it valuable for the self-directed patient who needs information to challenge their health care provider's understanding of mental illness. With a growing acceptance of the integrative approach to mental illness, Dr. Bongiorno has shown us the many ways that conventional pharmaceuticals—which are often indispensable—can be successfully integrated with naturopathic protocols.

—Review by Greg Schilhab
