

Traditional medical and therapeutic methods have improved over the years, but often they do not completely lessen or eliminate symptoms of mental illness. As a result, many people use complementary and alternative methods to help with recovery. These non-traditional treatments can be helpful but it's important to remember that, unlike prescription medications, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not review or approve most of them.

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) favors the term "Complementary health approaches," which encompasses three areas of unconventional treatment:

- Complementary methods where non-traditional treatments are given *in addition* to standard medical procedures
- Alternative methods of treatment used *instead of* established treatment
- Integrative methods that *combine* traditional and non-traditional as part of a treatment plan

Data is still lacking on the effectiveness and safety of many complementary practices, but there are studies supporting that some of these strategies seem to have minimal, if any, adverse effects.

Natural Products

Some people find that taking supplemental vitamins and minerals lessens the symptoms of their mental illness. There are several ways these substances may help.

Omega-3 fatty acids

Omega-3 fatty acids are a group of chemicals found in a number of different foods, including fish. Studies have found that certain types of omega-3 fatty acids are useful in the management of both medical and mental illnesses. Research shows that for young people experiencing an episode of psychosis for the first time, treatment with omega-3 fatty acids may help decrease their risk of developing a more chronic and serious form of schizophrenia.

Folate

Folate is a vitamin required for the human body to perform many essential processes on a day-to-day basis. Also called folic acid or vitamin B9, folate is a compound that the human body is unable to make on its own. Some people with mental illness have been shown to have low folate levels and may benefit from treatment with additional folate supplementation. At the current time, the FDA has approved only one form of folate—L-methylfolate (Deplin)—for use in the treatment of depression and schizophrenia. L-methylfolate has not been approved as a primary treatment, but rather as an additional form of treatment.

Medical foods

Medical foods are another type of product containing natural ingredients. These are foods made with or without specific nutrients to help treat a health condition. For example,

gluten-free foods are designed to give people with celiac disease the nutrients they need but without the gluten which makes them sick. Like supplements, medical foods are not as closely monitored by the FDA as prescription medicines.

Mind and Body Treatments

Many people find that physical activity is beneficial to their well-being. Some types of mind and body treatments are:

- Yoga
- Exercise (aerobic and anaerobic)
- Meditation
- Tai chi

Some of these, such as meditation, are mental exercises, while others are mostly concerned with muscle movement. However, all mind and body treatments can improve mood, anxiety and other symptoms of mental illness. In addition, physical activity can help reduce weight gain, fatigue, and other side effects of many conventional medicines used to treat mental health conditions.

Equine Therapy

Equine therapy, or equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP), is a form of animal-assisted therapy that teaches individuals how to groom, care for and ride horses. The goal of horse therapy is to use experience with horses to improve emotional and behavioral outcomes.

Small studies and anecdotal evidence have shown equine therapy can help reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression and impulsiveness common to many mental health conditions. However, more data is needed to test its effectiveness.

Make Sure to Check with Your Doctor

Even simple vitamins can interact with medication. While something may be safe to use with one prescription medicine, it can make others less effective or toxic. Also, any new exercise or outdoor activity should be discussed with a doctor. People taking certain medicines for depression, schizophrenia or other illnesses should make sure to stay cool and drink enough water to avoid heat stroke. Other medicines may cause a drop in body temperature, so special preparation may be needed for cold weather.

See more at: <http://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Treatment/Complementary-Health-Approaches>

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