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ALTERNATIVES TO PSYCHIATRIC DRUGS

NUTRITION

Proper nutrition is a fundamental element of good health for everyone. When you have been taking drugs, it is especially important to re-build your body nutritionally, both to aid in the detoxification process and as a means of strengthening yourself to better deal with stress.

There is no single dietary regime that is good for everyone at all times. What is important is to determine your individual needs and eat in a way that is both healthy and enjoyable for you.

There are, however, numerous food substances that are unhealthy for everyone. Some of these substances actually stimulate the stress response in the body and over-tax the organs of detoxification such as the liver and kidneys. Since these organs are already under stress by drug use, it is even more important to eliminate substances which will aggravate them further. Many of these unhealthy food products also deplete the adrenal glands whose healthy functioning is crucial for dealing with stress.

The following should be avoided as much as possible:

White or brown sugar - use honey, maple syrup or molasses sparingly
 Caffeine - avoid coffee, black tea, colas and chocolate
 Refined and processed foods - white flour products, canned foods,
 all foods that have preservatives, colouring agents, artificial
 flavouring or other chemicals
 Processed or hydrogenated oils or margarines, fats from animal
 sources, fried foods
 Salt
 Alcohol

Basically, it is best to eat fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes, raw nuts and seeds, some dairy products, eggs, fish and poultry. This will vary according to your individual requirements and preferences, and if food allergies are a problem. Allergies will be discussed in a later section.

Fasting and Cleansing Diets

Both fasting and raw food cleansing diets are powerful methods to help your body detoxify after you have stopped using drugs. Sometimes, however, going on such a program can produce more stress than it eliminates, depending on other stresses in your life. So consider it carefully after researching the various kinds of fasts and cleansing diets.

It is not advisable to fast while you are still taking drugs of any kind unless you are closely supervised by a doctor knowledgeable in fasting who can adjust your dosage. Fasting and cleansing diets sensitize your body to chemicals and the amount of drugs your body is able to tolerate can change rapidly. It is especially dangerous to fast while taking lithium since the dosage is already so close to the toxic level.

The waste products of many of the psychiatric drugs can remain in the body for over a year. Fasting and cleansing diets are best used to rid the body of these products after you have stopped taking the drug.

Vitamins

Drugs such as the tranquilizers deplete the body of vital nutrients. Vitamin and mineral supplements can be an important part of the program to rebuild physical and emotional strength and replenish the body. It is best, however, not to start randomly taking large handfuls of supplements without actually assessing your individual needs.

On the whole, everyone who has taken drugs has a higher than normal need for vitamin C, as this vitamin aids in the detoxifying process and is especially needed in times of stress. Other anti-stress vitamins and minerals include the B-complex, calcium, magnesium, potassium and zinc.

Biokinesiology (muscle testing) is a useful tool to help determine what supplements you may need. Hair analysis is used to determine mineral deficiencies and toxicity. You might also consider consulting a naturopath, an iridologist or a herbalist.

A naturopath is a physician who has been trained in natural methods of healing, including nutrition, herbs, homeopathy, spinal manipulation and other modalities. The medical plan (MSP) provides some coverage for consulting naturopathic physicians.

Iridologists diagnose health problems by reading the iris - the coloured portion of the eye. Both iridologists and herbalists are not covered by the medical plan. Information on how to contact alternative health practitioners is available at the Vancouver Women's Health Collective.

ALLERGY TESTING - CLINICAL ECOLOGY

Often we can pinpoint the sources of our distress. But for some, there seems to be no explanation for feeling agitated, depressed, sleepless, fatigued or irritable. You may be taking tranquilizers, anti-depressants or sleeping pills for long periods of time out of desperation, but find they really offer no relief from these symptoms.

If distressing mental states are persistent and inexplicable, you may be experiencing an allergic reaction to foods or environmental substances. As our environment becomes increasingly polluted, more and more people are developing debilitating allergies which may manifest as mental or physical symptoms.

Clinical ecology is a relatively new branch of medicine specializing in environmental allergy. If you suspect you may be experiencing allergies, you can be tested sub-lingually (under the tongue) by a specialist in clinical ecology. The traditional skin tests are not adequately accurate.

Biokinesiology can also be used to determine allergies. In addition there are methods that you can use to test yourself, such as the pulse test where you take your pulse systematically during the day and then after being exposed to suspected allergens. Another method involves fasting for several days and then introducing the various foods one by one to test for allergic reactions. There are books available which describe these methods.

After the allergy causing substances are identified, you eliminate those that cause the most severe reactions. The clinical ecologists recommend a rotation diet whereby food groups are rotated every four to seven days.

Constitutional homeopathy is also used to treat allergies. Homeopathy will be described in a later section of this paper.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

When coming off tranquilizers, it is essential to have an alternative method of coping with anxiety and stress. Even at the best of times, most of us are in a chronic state of tension due to living in such a high-stress society.

Learning a systematic relaxation technique such as Autogenic Training or Progressive Relaxation can be a valuable alternative to drugs. When used every day, both of these practices can help relieve anxiety, depression, irritability, insomnia as well as stress-related health problems such as migraine headaches, high blood pressure and other ailments.

If you are currently on drugs, the best time to learn a relaxation method is before you start the withdrawal process. When you are actually experiencing withdrawal symptoms, your anxiety level may be too high to be able to relax sufficiently to learn the technique. Sometimes, however, drugs like the major tranquilizers (Thorazine, etc.) can cause restlessness that might make it difficult to concentrate on the relaxation technique. In this case, it may be more useful to learn the relaxation method after lowering your dosage.

A description of Autogenic Training and Progressive Relaxation is included in the books on stress listed at the end of this paper. It is best to learn the methods in a class. Classes are quite widely available around Vancouver.

EXERCISE

You may become agitated, restless and irritable when coming off drugs, especially the minor tranquilizers such as Valium. This is not only due to the chemical withdrawal, but also involves the release of physical energy that has been suppressed by the drug. You may feel fatigue due to lack of sleep, or a combination of agitation and fatigue. Physical exercise during the day is a valuable way to release excess tension that can relieve some of the agitation as well as help you to sleep at night.

For many, vigorous activity such as aerobic classes, jogging, swimming, etc. may be needed. This kind of exercise is good both for the release of muscular tension as well as the release of anger that may surface after coming off tranquilizers.

Fast paced aerobic exercise, however, is over-emphasized in our culture. The gentle stretching of yoga and the relaxed movements of tai chi are also excellent forms of exercise. Both yoga and tai chi are complete systems of exercise which stimulate not only the muscles and joints, but also the internal organs and the cardiovascular system.

Walking is another undervalued but extremely good form of exercise. Each person must find the style of exercise which is right for her/him and incorporate it regularly in her/his daily life.

VISUALIZATION AND AFFIRMATIONS

Visualization is the use of mental imagery to effect positive changes within ourselves. It can be used in a problem-solving way to determine why you are using drugs (in the case of the minor tranquilizers like Valium) and it can be used to explore what you need to do to stop taking them. It is also a useful way of reinforcing a positive image of yourself as someone who does not need drugs.

For example, after going into a relaxed and receptive state through using a relaxation technique or deep breathing, you can imagine yourself in a situation where you would normally feel anxious and upset. Instead, envision yourself being calm, relaxed and in control of yourself in the situation.

You can also use affirmations - positive statements - that you say to yourself to reinforce the mental imagery.

It is advisable to read one of the various books on visualization before beginning a program as there are certain guidelines that are useful to follow.

BACH FLOWER REMEDIES

Bach flower remedies are very diluted flower essences that are useful for mental states such as fear, depression, despair, anxiety, indecision, loneliness, self-doubt and others. They were developed about forty years ago by Dr. Edward Bach, a British physician, who believed that in order to be healthy, we have to work through the personality to change negative mental states and become more attuned to our spiritual nature.

While the thirty-eight remedies are a definite alternative to the minor tranquilizers, they work on a subtle energy level and do not have the immediate effect that drugs have. The well-known Rescue Remedy, which is useful for any kind of physical or emotional crisis, is helpful when going through drug withdrawal, but would not alleviate all withdrawal symptoms.

Unlike homeopathy, anyone can use the Bach Flower remedies while still taking drugs. You can determine the remedy you need by consulting one of the books on the subject or you can go to a health practitioner who is familiar with them. Bach Flower remedies are available at Folklore Herbs in Vancouver.

HOMEOPATHY

Homeopathy is a complete system of healing which has been used successfully by people coming off the minor tranquilizers (Valium, etc.) It does not treat symptoms as such, but rather considers symptoms to be signs of the body's attempt to heal itself. It is a systematic method of treatment which seeks to stimulate the body's vital force and ability for self-healing.

Homeopathy is based on the "Law of Similars," that is, a substance which produces symptoms in a healthy person cures those same symptoms in a sick person. The remedies are given in extremely diluted form and prepared in a special process of systematic shaking.

Constitutional homeopathy differs greatly from the use of symptomatic homeopathic remedies that are now commonly sold in the health food stores. The homeopath does not prescribe a remedy for the symptom, but rather takes an extensive history and prescribes for the individual taking into consideration physical, mental and emotional factors. Homeopathic treatment is a big committment as the process can take months or years to complete.

During the initial course of treatment you may not be able to have any other types of treatments, such as chiropractic, mega-vitamins, etc. Some homeopaths require that you be drug-free before beginning treatment, while others will begin treatment while you are still

taking them and expect that after the first remedy you will lose your desire to take the drug.

For people on the major tranquilizers and lithium, it is best to begin homeopathic treatment after a period of stabilization without drugs.

HERBS

There are numerous herbs that have calming qualities that can be used when withdrawing from the minor tranquilizers. A useful combination is equal portions of valerian, spearmint and chamomile. Other combinations, such as valerian, scullcap, wood betony and blue vervain are especially useful for insomnia.

The effects of herbs are more subtle than drugs, so do not expect to switch from Valium to valerian tea without experiencing any withdrawal discomfort if you have used drugs for a long time. If you are on the major tranquilizers, you may find the effects of herbs to be too subtle to be effective until your dosage of tranquilizers is very low.

While the effects of herbs are more subtle than drugs, they can still be very potent substances and it is important to use them wisely and not become dependent on them. As with any of the methods described in this paper, it is best to read more about them before trying them.

ACUPUNCTURE

Acupuncture has been used frequently for drug withdrawal. What acupuncture does is stimulate a more normal energy flow throughout the body by the insertion of fine stainless steel needles.

Traditional Chinese medicine believes that a life force or energy controls the body's main organs. The energy flows along twelve pathways known as meridians. In a healthy body, the energy flows freely, whereas illness is signified by an energy blockage.

Treatment with acupuncture starts with a careful external examination of the body, and the taking of the pulses. The two wrists contain twelve pulses that correspond to the twelve meridians of the body. Each pulse signifies the state of health of a different organ and provides guidance as to what needles should be used, how many and where they should be placed.

Acupuncture is done by both doctors and naturopaths. It is not covered by the medical plan.

REFERENCES

Valium:

Stopping Valium by the Public Citizen Health Research Group

I'm Dancing as Fast as I Can by Barbara Gordon

Valium Withdrawal - an audio tape by Dr. Vernelle Fox

Nutrition:

Diet for a Small Planet by Frances Moore Lappe

Are you Confused by Paavo Airola

Nutrition Almanac by Nutrition Search, Inc.

Hypoclycemia: A Better Approach by Paava Airola

Allergies:

How to Control Your Allergies by Robert Forman

An Alternative Approach to Allergies by Theron Randolph

Biokinesiology:

The Body Says Yes by Priscilla Kapel

Orthomolecular Psychiatry:

Mega-Vitamin Therapy by Ruth Adams & Frank Murray

How to Live With Schizophrenia by Abram Hoffer & Humphry Osmond

Stress:

Guide to Stress Reduction by L. John Mason

The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook By Martha Davis

Visualization:

Imagineering for Health by Serge King

Bach Flower Remedies:

Handbook on the Bach Flower Remedies by Philip Chancellor

Homeopathy:

Homeopathy - Science for the New Man by George Vithoulkas

Herbs:

Dr. Christophers School of Natural Healing by Dr. John Christopher

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