

Guido Mase' RH(AHG) 2007
guido@grianherbs.com
www.grianherbs.com
(802)229-5895

Using herbs for support when transitioning off psychiatric medication

Specific strategies and Materia Medica

Introduction. Often, powerful psychiatric medications are given for a diagnosis that may be questionable. In these cases, people can be subjected to a drug which, though not 'addictive' in the classical sense of an intoxicating substance, can nevertheless have severe withdrawal symptoms (which unfortunately appear to confirm diagnoses). In many other cases, psychiatric medications can be life-saving and essential support, but are not intended for permanent use. In both of these cases, herbal and nutritional support can make the transition off these medications much smoother and easier while also correcting underlying deficits or imbalances that may have contributed to any neuropsychiatric 'symptoms'.

Any process of transition will take time, and should be done in consultation with the prescribing physician / psychiatrist. It can also be very helpful to work with a counselor or other mental health practitioner who does not prescribe medications during this process.

Strategy: Ensure optimal GI tract function. Important for reducing the overall level of systemic inflammation and sensitivity, reducing visceral input to the central nervous system.

- Isolate potential dietary allergens / sensitizing ingredients (corn, soy, wheat, dairy, sugar, food colorings and preservatives, artificial sweeteners, e.g.). This can be done through an 'elimination diet'.
- Use digestive bitters, appropriate to the constitution, and carminatives as necessary to craft an 'aperitif' tincture. Some examples: dandelion (*Taraxacum off.*), blue vervain (*Verbena hastata*), cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum*), peppermint (*Mentha x piperita*), chamomile (*Matricaria chamomilla*).

Strategy: Ensure optimal function of the circulatory system. Important to reduce muscular tension, balance body temperature, and dispel energetic blockages. Many circulatory herbs also improve cerebral blood flow, helping with attention and mood.

- Strengthen vascular integrity using flavonoid-rich berry foods. Some examples: hawthorn (*Crataegus spp.*), blueberries, cranberries, bilberries (*Vaccinium spp.*).
- Balance vascular pressure, if the constitution calls for it, using garlic (*Allium sativum*) and relaxing diaphoretics like linden (*Tilia spp.*) and antispasmodics like crampbark (*Viburnum opulus*).
- Improve the oxygenation and circulation of the blood with ginkgo (*G. biloba*) and gotu kola (*Centella asiatica*). These herbs also have specific anti-anxiety effects as well (see below).

Simply applying the two strategies above can go a very long way in supporting anyone's constitution, and thereby reducing the amount of extraneous inflammatory 'noise' that is disturbing the nervous system. This will make any withdrawal symptoms much easier to handle.

Strategy: Identify any other underlying constitutional weakness. This often can help in understanding the reasons that originally brought on the use of a prescription medication. This knowledge can help to select and apply other support strategies that can prevent or reduce the frequency of relapse.

Strategy: Milky oat tops (*Avena sativa*).

General application of this incredible herbal tonic should be used in all conditions affecting the nervous system. It is restorative, regenerative and mineralizing, providing essential nutrients neurons need. It can serve as the base for an herbal tea blend, or be taken alone as a tincture or tea. Oat tops must be consumed daily and for long periods of time (6-12 months), but doing so inevitably strengthens the nerves and associated endocrine tissues (hypothalamus/pituitary and adrenal glands). If taken as tea, at least 2-3TBS of tops should be brewed daily, either alone or as part of a mix. If taken as a tincture, 3ml (droppers almost full) morning, noon and night is a good starting point. I find the tincture is more effective during acute, intense episodes or at the beginning of a pharmaceutical weaning period, and that the tea works well for longer-term maintenance.

Strategy: Nervine tonics

These are the milder, generally non-sedating herbs that even out the waves of consciousness that wash across the nervous system, providing gentle balance over time. Some examples: lemon balm (*Melissa off.*), scullcap (*Scutellaria lateriflora*). St. Johnswort (*Hypericum perforatum*) also falls under this category, but should not be used during a transition period as it has powerful effects on the metabolism of pharmaceuticals. It makes an excellent, warming nervine that can be used later, however.

Strategy: herbal support for specific diagnoses.

Anxiety: Ginkgo (*G. biloba*), Kava kava (*Piper methysticum*), Valerian (*V. off.*)

Mania / excess / schizophrenia: Hops (*Humulus lupulus*), Rauwolfia (*R. serpentina*), Coleus (*C. forskholii*), Rose (*Rosa spp.*)

Depression: Rhodiola (*R. rosea*), Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*), Rose (*Rosa spp.*), Huperzia (*Lycopodium serrata*)

Insomnia: SHORT TERM Valerian (*V. off.*), Hops (*Humulus lupulus*); LONG TERM Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*), Coleus (*C. forskholii*), California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*)

Neuromotor symptoms (convulsions, tics, epilepsy): Mullein root (*Verbascum thapsus*), Crampbark (*Viburnum opulus*), Kava kava (*Piper methysticum*), Huperzia (*Lycopodium serrata*), Prickly Ash (*Zanthoxylum americanum*).

ADD/ADHD: Ginkgo (*G. biloba*), Rhodiola (*R. rosea*), Coffee (*C. arabica*), low-dose and watered down

These are some of the more specific herbs I have used for support. Obviously they cannot work in a vacuum, and must be part of a comprehensive protocol adjusted for each individual's constitution and imbalances.

Materia Medica:

Scullcap leaf

Safest of all the cooling nervines, and also very effective in over-stimulated conditions. The tincture of the fresh herb is very good, at doses of ½ tsp three times a day between meals. A tea of the dry herb can be made as well, though I find that more tonic and less calming.

Lemon Balm leaf

The “gladdening herb” that is specifically indicated with more depressive tendencies, or if there is a lot of digestive wind. Its energy actually tends toward warmth, and astringency. It makes an excellent tea.

Blue Vervain leaf and flower

A more powerful digestive stimulant that is also an excellent nervine for “excess” constitutions. It cools and is extremely bitter. The dose of tincture is ¼ to ½ tsp 15 minutes before every meal.

Chamomile flower

Tending more towards warmth, this calmative is famous for relaxing colic in infants. It helps overanxious adults as well, especially if there is digestive spasming, pain, and wind. The tea is the only way to go: start with two cups a day.

Hops strobiles

A deeply bitter, sedating remedy. I use it in the short-term only, for insomnia where it works quite well. Take ½ tsp of tincture in a little water about 30 minutes before bed. Contraindicated in depression, or for long-term use.

California Poppy whole plant

A milder sedative nervine, especially useful in children to help with teething pain. It is also useful for adults, as part of formulas for insomnia especially if there is early morning waking and restlessness. The tincture of the fresh plant is taken at doses of 5-10 drops for children, ¼ to 1 tsp for adults.

Rauwolfia root

This is a very powerful, downward-trending remedy that reduces activation of the central nervous system. It is useful in buffering episodes of mania, but should not be used with bipolar or depressive constitutions as it is too cold. Also, it substantially lowers blood pressure and will interact with blood pressure medicines. The tincture is given at doses of 5-30 drops twice a day.

Oats tops

The premier nervine tonic, made from the immature seedheads of the oat grain (“milky tops”). It is nourishing, tonifying, and incredibly safe. I use it as the base of almost any nervine formula. The tincture made from the fresh tops is excellent for active, scattered symptoms, and can be taken at dosages of ½ to 2 tsp at least three times daily. The tea of the dried tops is a more long-term rebalancer and has some adaptogenic quality as well.

Hawthorn berry, leaf, flower

Warming, heart-healthy, and calming, this herb can be used as the berry, leaf, or flower. It is useful to build even nervous energy in both depressive and anxious conditions, helping to impart focus and calm without stimulating in any way. Its most common indication is the concomitant presence of cardiovascular disease. Take 1 tsp of the tincture two or three times daily; or make a strong tea; or eat spoonfuls of Hawthorn berry jam.

Rose bud and flower

Emotionally soothing, I've found Rose to help rebalance nervous issues that have abuse or abandonment at their root. Aromatherapy works well here; also, glycerin-based extracts. Rose can also feature as part of a nice tea formula, especially to balance it energetically. Another specific indication is "heartburn" (literally).

Ginkgo leaf extract

Recent research points to the standardized extract of this plant as a useful treatment for anxiety. Its main indications are circulatory deficiency and memory/focus issues. Try for 240mg to 480mg of the standardized extract daily.

St. Johnswort flower buds

Use care with this spicy, warming nervine tonic as it interacts with many different medications. Its usefulness is in conditions of depleted, deficient nervous energy – such as depression or insomnia – and its solar connection makes it an excellent adjunct for the "winter blues" that sometimes accompany the shorter days. The dose is between ½ and 2 tsp of the tincture daily.

Ashwagandha root

This solanaceous root comes to the materia medica from Ayurveda. It is an excellent example of a Yin tonic, nurturing deep strength and specifically helping address the root deficiencies behind insomnia patterns. The powder can be given, 1 or 2 tsp twice daily; alternatively, the tincture works well too, at about ½ to 1 tsp twice daily.

Rhodiola root

Also known as "arctic root" or "golden root", the extract of this rose-flavored plant is an incredible tonic for low energy states, lack of focus, and depression. It has an invigorating, Yang quality while at the same time not being too stimulating. I generally suggest it for relatively limited periods of time (2-6 months) or on an as-needed basis (1-2 days a week). The dose ranges from 60 to 120 drops twice daily, but not later than 3pm.

Valerian root

A warming and somewhat spicy root with a characteristic odor, Valerian is most indicated in frazzled, anxious conditions with cold hands and feet and perhaps a little difficulty falling asleep. It can be habit-forming and abused if the dose is too high or continued for too long. Start with 90 drops in a little water, two to three times a day.

Kava-kava rootstock

This powerful relaxant and anti-anxiety herb is more cooling in nature, and benefits anxious states characterized by deep muscular tension, especially in the neck and shoulders. It is also an effective alternative to prescription anti-anxiety medicines, and aids in supporting the treatment of panic disorders. Take ½ tsp of the tincture in a little water, holding it in your mouth until numbness develops.