

Your mental healthcare: the integrative *solution*

*A series of books on safe, effective and affordable non-medication
treatments of mental health problems*

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Disclaimer

The information provided in this book is intended as a concise summary of the principles and methods of integrative mental health care and does not constitute medical advice. The publisher and author are not responsible for any specific health needs that may require medical supervision, and are not liable for any damages or negative consequences from any treatment, action or application to any person reading or following the information in this book. References to internet resources are provided for informational purposes only and do not constitute endorsement of any websites or other sources. Readers should be aware that the websites listed in this book may change.

Part I: What the e-books in this series are about and how they can help you

Introducing a series of e-books on integrative mental healthcare

I wrote this short e-book to introduce readers to a [series of e-books on integrative mental health care](#) a rapidly growing field that includes concepts and treatments from mainstream Western medicine and alternative medicine. My chief goal in writing these e-books was to create a practical and affordable resource on safe and effective *non-medication* treatments for many common mental health problems. The e-book you are reading discusses important concepts and methods of integrative mental healthcare. I am offering it at no cost to everyone interested in learning about integrative mental healthcare.

The [other books in the series](#) provide concise reviews of the evidence for a variety of non-medication approaches used to treat many common mental health problems and safe and effective strategies for using them. Each e-book on a particular mental health problem covers the uses of herbals and other natural supplements, whole body and mind-body approaches, and energy therapies for treating that problem or preventing it from returning.

The e-books cover the following mental health problems:

- [Alcohol and Drug Abuse](#)
- [Anxiety](#)
- [Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder \(ADHD\)](#)
- [Bipolar disorder](#)
- [Dementia and mild cognitive impairment](#)
- [Depression](#)

- [Insomnia](#)
- [Post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#)
- [Psychosis](#)

If you are currently struggling with a mental health problem and taking a medication that isn't helping, experiencing adverse effects, or you simply can't afford to continue taking a medication that *is* working the e-books in this series provide valuable information about non-medication treatments that may help you feel and function better. If you are currently experiencing good mental health but you've struggled with depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, or another mental health problem in the past the e-books in this series will help you create a wellness plan that fits your lifestyle and your budget. Most important, the e-books will teach you how to *think about* your mental health care in a more holistic and more effective way.

About Dr. Lake's background and qualifications

Your time is valuable and I'm guessing you've found this e-book after searching on the internet for a solution to a mental health problem that is interfering with your ability to work, go to school, be in a relationship or cope with the stress of day-to-day life. Perhaps you're looking for a practical resource for a friend, relative, loved one or a child. Before continuing you probably want to know something about my qualifications to write this e-book and the others in the series. I attended Stanford University as an undergraduate, completed my medical training at University of California, Irvine, and completed my residency training in adult psychiatry at Stanford University Hospital. I am board-certified and have practiced psychiatry for 20 years in diverse settings including hospitals,

clinics, emergency rooms, and in my own private practice. I previously served on clinical faculty at Stanford University Hospital where I taught residents about the concepts and methods of integrative mental health care. I've lectured to physicians and other mental health professionals about integrative mental healthcare at major national and international conferences. I publish a regular column on integrative mental health care in *Psychiatric Times*, a leading trade publication for mental health professionals. I've authored numerous articles and chapters in medical journals and textbooks, and I've written, co-authored or edited [four textbooks](#) covering all aspects of the theory and practice of integrative mental healthcare. Along the way I've been centrally involved in efforts to establish integrative mental healthcare as a new specialty in its own right. I am a founding member and former Chair of two initiatives aimed at changing mental healthcare into a more effective, safer and more person-centered model of care: the [American Psychiatric Association Caucus on Complementary, Alternative and Integrative Medicine](#) and the [International Network of Integrative Mental Health](#). Both initiatives are committed to educating and training mental health professionals in the safe, *evidence-based* uses of non-medication and integrative approaches in mental healthcare and bringing this new way of thinking and practicing medicine into the mainstream.

Why I wrote the e-books in this series

A growing number of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, nurses and other mental health professionals around the world believe that existing *conventional* treatment approaches such as prescription medications and psychotherapy do not adequately address the mental health needs of people

everywhere. There are many reasons for this. First of all, even though prescription medications are often effective and safe, they are not available in many parts of the world and where they are available they are often too expensive for many people to afford. The potential value of prescription medications for people who suffer with mental illness is also limited by the fact that many medications are no more effective than placebos and sometimes cause serious adverse effects. The limitations of prescription medications have resulted in renewed interest in complementary and alternative therapies, and efforts by mental health professionals, researchers and our patients to find more effective, safer and more affordable ways to treat many common mental health problems and prevent them from returning.

What *is* integrative mental healthcare?

In a few words, integrative mental healthcare:

- is a person-centered approach to mental health care
- that takes into account the needs, preferences and circumstances of each unique person
- focuses on maintaining optimal health and treating symptoms *not* disorders
- uses both mainstream approaches like medications and psychotherapy, as well as complementary and alternative therapies
- is based on the *best available* evidence

The conventional biomedical model of mental health care widely practiced in the U.S. and many other countries emphasizes the use of potent prescription

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medications to treat ‘disorders.’ Medications will probably continue to play an important role in mental health care—especially for managing symptoms of severe mental health problems such as bipolar disorder and psychosis—however non-medication treatments will play an increasingly important role in mental healthcare as more research evidence accumulates showing that they are both safe and effective. In contrast to the conventional biomedical model, integrative mental healthcare is concerned with maintaining optimal wellness and *managing symptoms* of each unique person in the context of their values, preferences and circumstances. Advantages of integrative mental health care over the conventional biomedical model, include:

- improved response to treatment
- reducing the dosage of a prescription medication
- reducing adverse effects of prescription medications
- saving money on treatment costs
- having greater control over your symptoms
- greater emphasis on maintaining wellness
- developing a more personalized plan for treatment and prevention

It is important to point out that integrative mental healthcare does not reject the use of prescription medications, psychotherapy or other mainstream approaches or discount their benefits for mental health problems. Medications and psychotherapy are often beneficial and safe and bring enormous relief to human suffering. Integrative practitioners often prescribe medications and recommend psychotherapy but go *beyond this limited model of care*. In addition to established conventional *biomedical* therapies integrative practitioners also

recommend a wide range of non-medication treatment approaches such as herbals, vitamins and other natural supplements, whole body approaches such as exercise and massage, changes in the diet, mind-body practices and energy therapies such as acupuncture and healing touch, and many other 'alternative' therapies where scientific evidence supports their safe and effective use.

Because integrative mental health care focuses on each person's unique needs and circumstances, treatment is often highly individualized. This means that there is no single 'best' treatment for any particular mental health problem, but each person may have a 'most appropriate' treatment plan depending on the particular symptoms they are experiencing in the context of their unique life story, values, preferences and circumstances ([more](#)).

How to get the most out of the e-books in this series

The e-books in this series are designed to give you the maximum amount of information in the least amount of time. You can read this short e-book and any of the other e-books in the series in a few hours or less. Detailed contents are listed up front so that you can quickly navigate to different sections with a touch of your finger or a click of your mouse pad. The last few pages of each e-book contain a [summary of the most important points](#). All e-books in the series include links to [valuable internet resources](#) to help you find quality brands of natural supplements, important safety information, and qualified professional help if you think you need it.

If you downloaded this free e-book when you purchased another e-book in the [series](#) on a particular mental health problem I encourage you to *read this e-book first* in order to get a good understanding of what integrative mental health care is all about. By reading this e-book before you read the e-book on your particular mental health problem, you'll probably come up with a more appropriate and effective treatment plan the first time around. If you don't have time today ***try to set aside one hour sometime later this week to read the entire e-book on your particular mental health problem before making any decisions about stopping or changing your current treatment plan, or starting any new treatment.*** There's no need to worry if you don't have enough time to read this e-book. I've included enough material on general methods in the e-books on particular mental health problems so that you should be able to develop an effective integrative treatment plan even if you don't read this e-book first.

How the e-books in this series will benefit you if you have a mental health problem

Because you're taking the time to read this e-book I'm assuming that you or a relative, friend or loved one has a mental health problem that hasn't gotten better with prescription medications, psychological approaches, or non-medication treatments. You've probably found this e-book when searching on the internet for a *different and hopefully more effective solution* to your problem. Perhaps you, a loved one or relative is currently taking a prescription medication for depression, anxiety or another mental health problem but you're experiencing side effects. Perhaps the medication *is* working but it's too expensive or your insurance doesn't cover the cost so you can no longer afford

to take it. Or maybe you've had a particular mental health problem in the past and you're feeling and functioning well at this time but you're looking for practical tips on prevention.

If any one of the above scenarios describes your situation you've come to the right place. The e-books in this series will give you the tools you need to develop safe, effective and affordable integrative approaches for combatting mental health problems and maintaining good mental health. You will learn about many of the best non-medication treatment approaches for depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and other mental health problems and how to develop a practical treatment plan addressing your particular symptoms. I'll also guide you in finding quality products or services.

If you're currently taking a prescription medication, an herbal medicine or other natural product for a mental health problem I'm *not suggesting* that you stop taking it. That decision should only be made in consultation with the physician or other qualified health care provider who prescribed or recommended the medication or natural supplement you are taking. However, if you haven't gotten better after taking a medication or a natural supplement for the recommended period of time, or you are experiencing unpleasant side effects, ***I am suggesting that you remain open minded about another way to approach your mental health problem.*** If this describes your current situation, I encourage you to tell your physician or other healthcare provider about treatment alternatives in the e-book on your particular mental health problem.

By the time you finish reading the e-book on your mental health problem you'll know enough about many practical and affordable approaches to develop a custom plan that will help you recover from an ongoing mental health problem and stay healthy. You'll also know whether it makes more sense to manage a mental health problem on your own or seek professional help. Most importantly you will know how to *think about* your personal mental healthcare in new more effective way.

How the e-books in this series will benefit you if you are a mental health professional

If you are a mental health professional you may have purchased this book or others in the [series](#) to gain a general understanding of the principles and methods of integrative mental healthcare so that you can help your patients find better answers to questions about the range of non-medication treatment choices for their mental health problems. You should know that in recent decades there has been a gradual trend toward increased use of *complementary and alternative* (CAM) therapies in mental healthcare as well as in all areas of healthcare. You should also know that anyone diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder is significantly more likely to use CAM approaches compared to the general population. The situation becomes complicated when you realize that the majority of people who use CAM therapies take at least one prescription medication at the same time—often without telling their doctor or therapist—resulting in *potentially serious safety problems*. Further, although many CAM therapies have little supporting evidence or may be unsafe, the majority of people who use CAM therapies to self-treat severe anxiety, severe depression or

other serious mental health problems, think that CAM therapies are as effective as prescription medications.

The e-books in this series provide concise, jargon-free summaries of the evidence for different non-medication approaches used to treat many common mental health problems. They are written to be practical resources for quickly identifying treatments that may be helpful for your clients so that you can advise them about appropriate, safe uses of a range of non-medication approaches. If you want to learn more about the concepts and methods of integrative mental health care, or need more in-depth information about non-medication treatments for a particular mental health problem, you can find detailed information on all aspects of integrative mental healthcare in [other books I've written](#).

What the e-books on specific mental health problems cover

Summaries of the non-medication treatment approaches covered in the e-books on particular mental health problems include the following information:

- Name and category of treatment
- How the treatment works (when known)
- Dosages (for natural supplements) or frequency of use (for whole-body, mind-body or energy approaches)
- Examples of safe and effective treatment combinations
- Comments about adverse effects and warnings pertaining to treatment combinations that may be unsafe and should be avoided
- Average duration of treatment needed to achieve beneficial results

All e-books on specific mental health problems include the following sections:

- **Understanding the problem.** This section will help you better understand your particular mental health problem whether you're feeling depressed or anxious, cannot sleep, or have another problem. It includes concise reviews of the causes and risk factors associated with the mental health problem being discussed. Typical symptoms of the mental health problem being covered are described together with medical or mental health problems that may occur together with that problem.
- **Taking inventory.** In this section you will learn more about the particular symptoms that make up your mental health problem. You will be referred to standardized assessment tools on the internet that will help you will find out whether your symptoms are mild, moderate or severe.
- **Identifying treatments that make sense for you: evaluating the evidence.** This section reviews the evidence for specific non-medication treatments of the mental health problems covered in the series. It is the largest and most important section of every e-book in the series and provides the information you will need to develop a treatment plan or advise a client. Highlights for each treatment are summarized in easy-to-read bullets so you can quickly scan the material included under a particular treatment approach ([more](#)).
- **Developing a customized treatment plan that is *right for you*.** This section discusses the steps needed to develop a treatment plan based on your current symptoms and whether you have other mental health problems or

a medical problem that may not have been diagnosed or is not being adequately treated. This process also takes into account treatments you've previously tried, your personal preferences, treatments that are available where you live, and financial considerations.

- **Making changes along the way: re-evaluating your treatment plan and making it better.** This section will help you answer important questions such as:
 - How will I know if my current treatment plan is working?
 - What can I do about side effects?
 - How long should I wait before trying a new treatment if I'm not getting better?
 - Should I seek professional care?
 - When should I think about stopping my current treatment plan?
- **Repeating the steps until you find a treatment plan that works for you.** If your first treatment plan has unsatisfactory results this section will guide you through steps you can follow in order to develop a treatment plan that works better.
- **Summary of main points in the book.** This section is a concise review of the most important concepts and methods in the e-book.

- **Finding quality products and services.** This section provides [links to valuable internet resources](#) on natural supplements, safety information and a variety of non-medication approaches that will help you develop your treatment plan.

Part II: Methods in integrative mental health care—what you need to know

Getting started

The following sections describe a simple method you can use to develop an individualized plan for maintaining good mental health or treating symptoms of a particular mental health problem. Developing a plan that makes sense for you involves identifying treatments that are supported by research evidence and available where you live that suit your values and preferences, and fit your budget.

Conventional treatments like medications and psychotherapy are often beneficial for mental health problems however when used alone they seldom help enough. When approaching any mental health problem the best strategy is to stay open to a broad range of treatments and not rely on medications, psychotherapy or alternative approaches only. Because every human being is unique at the level of biology, psychology and culture people with the same symptoms often experience the same *kind* of mental health problem in different ways. As a result people who report similar symptoms may respond quite differently to a particular medication, herbal or natural supplement, psychotherapy, mind-body practice, or other approach. In other words, because each person is unique there is *no single best treatment approach* for everyone who has the same *kind of* mental health problem. Therefore the *best* treatment

plan for each person can only be determined on a case by case basis taking into account his or her unique history, symptoms, values, beliefs, needs, preferences and circumstances.

Safety is always the most important consideration

All biological treatments including prescription medications, herbals and other natural supplements, potentially cause adverse effects. Safety should always be the highest priority whenever you are thinking about starting any new treatment.

The e-books in this series on particular mental health problems contain information about when it is *safe or not safe* to use a particular natural supplement alone or in combination with a prescription medication or other treatment approach. When considering starting any new treatment—whether it is a prescription medication, a natural supplement, a mind-body therapy, an energy therapy, or a combination of two or more different treatments—the first step is to carefully review the safety information about the treatment(s) you are considering. **You should try only those treatments or treatment combinations that are known to be both safe and effective ([more](#)).**

Understanding your mental health problem

Many things can affect mental health in both good and bad ways. Therefore, before starting treatment for any mental health problem it is important to have a clear understanding of the underlying causes of your symptoms including medical, psychological, social and cultural factors that might be affecting you.

The e-books in this series concisely review what is known about medical and psychological causes of the particular mental health problem that is being described.

Is your mental health problem caused by an undiagnosed or untreated medical problem?

Before starting any new treatment it is important to find out whether you have a medical problem that may be causing your mental health problem or *making it worse*. I am assuming that most people who read this e-book have access to the internet, reside in a country where there are well-trained medical professionals, and can find quality medical care.

If you have a known medical problem and have already been examined and treated by a physician or other health care provider but your medical or mental health problem has not improved, it is ***possible that the root cause(s) of your symptom(s) were not correctly diagnosed in the first place***. It is also possible that a different medical or mental health problem may be interfering with the beneficial effects of the treatment you have been using. In this case it may be helpful to write down:

- your current symptoms
- how long you've had your symptoms
- your circumstances when your symptoms began
- how your symptoms have changed over time
- psychological, social or spiritual problems that make your symptoms worse.

It is possible—perhaps even *likely*—that the underlying causes of your symptoms have changed over time ([more](#)).

Taking inventory of your symptoms

After underlying medical problems have been identified, evaluated and successfully treated the next step involves taking inventory of your symptoms by answering standardized questions or filling in a symptom check-list. For example, common symptoms of depression include:

- loss of energy
- poor concentration
- frequent thoughts of death
- loss of interest
- feelings of worthlessness
- not sleeping enough or sleeping too much
- poor appetite or eating too much
- thoughts of committing suicide

In taking inventory of your symptoms you will learn a great deal about the particular mental health problem *or problems* that are affecting you. Your answers to standardized questions will also give you valuable insights when developing a treatment plan that makes sense for you. The Hamilton Depression Inventory is a tool used by depressed individuals to rate the severity of their symptoms. It consists of a series of questions that ask you about different symptoms that are part of a larger ‘symptom pattern’ that comprises depressed mood. [Links to questionnaires](#) designed to help you accurately rate the severity of your symptoms are provided in the companion website to this series of e-

books. If you are experiencing more than one mental health problem you may find the book on that condition helpful. Click [here](#) to see a list of e-books in the series on specific mental health problems.

Evaluating different treatment choices: evidence, availability, personal preferences and cost

After you've taken inventory of your symptoms and assuming that no medical problems have been identified that may be causing your symptoms or making them worse, the next step involves developing a treatment plan addressing your particular mental health problem. This involves identifying treatments that are safe, effective, available where you live, and affordable. This process also involves deciding whether to undertake treatment on your own or with the advice of a qualified healthcare provider.

Five treatment categories reflect different ways treatments work

Different approaches used to treat mental health problems or maintain optimal wellbeing can be divided into 5 general categories reflecting different ways treatments work to alleviate symptoms and promote healing:

- **Biological treatments** have beneficial effects at the level of a well-defined molecular mechanism. Prescription medications as well as natural supplements work in this way.
- **Whole body approaches** have beneficial effects on the body in general and improve both physical and mental health and well-being. Exercise and massage are examples.
- **Mindfulness and mind-body approaches** are based on concepts from traditional healing aimed at improving 'harmony' between mind and body.

Approaches in this category often involve using the breath or mental imagery to achieve a calm state of mind. While some mindfulness and mind-body approaches are based on particular religious or spiritual beliefs, you do not need to believe in God or have a particular spiritual practice in order to benefit from these approaches. Meditation, yoga, Tai-chi, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) are examples.

- **Treatments based on scientifically verified forms of energy** including electricity, magnetic fields, light and sound have beneficial effects at many levels in the body and brain. Examples include full-spectrum bright light exposure, electroencephalographic (EEG) biofeedback, cardiac coherence training, cranial electrotherapy stimulation (CES), music and specialized forms of sound therapy.
- **Treatments based on postulated forms of energy** that have not been verified by science such as Reiki, Healing Touch, qigong and prayer are believed to be beneficial at the level of poorly understood energetic processes that may play a role in maintaining optimal physical and psychological wellness. Emerging research findings suggest that certain ‘energetic’ therapies have beneficial effects on mental health.

Three tiers of evidence

I use a ‘3-tier’ approach to rate treatments based on the relative strength of evidence supporting their use for a particular mental health problem. This rating system applies equally to prescription medications, natural supplements, mind-body approaches and energy therapies.

- **Tier A:** treatments are supported by strong research evidence for treatment of a particular mental health problem
- **Tier B:** treatments are often recommended by healthcare providers for the treatment of a particular mental health problem but are supported by less evidence than tier A treatments.
- **Tier C:** treatments are sometimes recommended by healthcare providers and may be effective in some cases but are supported by inconsistent or weak research evidence

Treatments known to be ineffective or unsafe are not included in the series because they are *not potentially helpful* and some may even be unsafe and should thus be avoided. In each e-book in the series different treatments are ranked according to the level of evidence supporting their use for the particular mental health problem covered in that book from 'highest' (Tier A), to 'intermediate' (Tier B) to 'lowest' (Tier C). Treatments included in each Tier are listed in alphabetical order and not according to the relative strength of evidence supporting their use for a particular mental health problem.

In some cases, for example, non-medication treatments of bipolar disorder, psychosis and dementia, no Tier A treatments are listed. This is because *currently available* non-medication approaches used to treat these mental health problems are *not* supported by the highest *level* of research evidence. In fact the majority of non-medication treatments used in mental healthcare belong to tier B or C because, although many are frequently recommended by healthcare providers, widely used, often effective and generally safe, their use for treating a particular mental health problem is not supported by the *highest level* of

evidence. It is important to point out that the same can be said about the majority of currently available prescription medications. In other words, many medications widely prescribed for common mental health problems are *not supported* by the highest level of evidence and if they were included in this series of books they would probably belong to tier B or C. This is an important limitation of both prescription medications and non-medication (i.e. CAM) approaches and it is important for you to know about it, especially if you are searching for new ways to treat a serious mental health problem like bipolar disorder, psychosis or dementia.

In face of the limitations of currently available approaches on both the conventional and alternative side of mental healthcare, the good news is that many widely prescribed medications, natural supplements, mind-body practices and other approaches often have significant beneficial effects and lack serious safety problems. Whether you are considering trying a new prescription medication or a different non-medication approach for your mental health problem it is always best to start with one or more treatments supported by the highest level of evidence. In the e-books on particular mental health problems the section on treatment planning will guide you through the steps involved in developing a treatment plan using the *best available* complementary and alternative treatments for that problem.

Some questions to ask yourself before starting

Before starting any new treatment—including a prescription medication, a natural supplement, a mind-body practice or any other approach you should first be able to answer the following questions:

- ◆ What treatment approaches for my particular mental health problem or problems are supported by solid evidence?
- ◆ Among the treatments supported by solid evidence is there a specific treatment that makes the most sense for me in view of the *type* and *severity* of my symptoms, treatments I've already tried and how well they worked?
- ◆ What (if any) safety problems may take place with the treatment(s) I am considering?
- ◆ Is the treatment I am considering something I can use on my own, or do I need to work with a trained healthcare provider in order to use it in a way that is both safe and effective?
- ◆ Given my circumstances is a treatment I am considering *realistic*? In other words, is a treatment I am considering *available* where I live and *affordable*?

Your answers to these questions will guide you in selecting treatment choices you can use to develop an integrative treatment plan that addresses your particular symptoms ***that you are open to trying and is realistic for you.***

Deciding whether to use more than one treatment

An important decision you will need to make early in the course of treatment is whether to try one treatment only or two or more different treatments at the same time. For example, depending on your particular symptoms and whether

they are moderate or severe, the plan you develop may involve healthy lifestyle changes together with one treatment approach, or a combination of two or more treatments. For example, people who struggle with chronic depressed mood may benefit more from taking a prescription antidepressant together with a particular natural supplement to 'boost' the effectiveness of their medication. In other cases the work involved in using a combined approach may *not* be more beneficial for a particular mental health problem than using a simple mind-body approach. For example, some people who struggle with generalized anxiety may feel and function consistently better when they do a daily yoga practice that includes relaxing guided imagery before bedtime.

As a general rule it is better to keep things as simple as possible using only those approaches that are beneficial for your symptoms and that you're motivated to use. Along the same lines it makes sense to try a particular combination of two or more treatments *when there is evidence that the combination works better than either one and you have the resources and motivation to use more than one treatment*. Following the same reasoning it is usually better to avoid particular combinations of two or more prescription medications or natural supplements unless it has been established that they can be safely combined and *the combination will probably improve the response you would probably get using either treatment alone*. On the other hand, taking two or more treatments that belong to *different categories* (i.e. biological, whole body, mind-body, and energetic) is generally safe and often beneficial depending on the particular mental health problem that is being treated and how severe your symptoms are. For example, regular exercise, bright light exposure, folic acid and a prescription

antidepressants are in different treatment *categories* and can be safely combined with a reasonable expectation of greater improvement in depressed mood than you would probably achieve using any of these approaches alone, and without any risk of adverse effects or toxic interactions. Examples of safe and effective integrative strategies are included under the treatment summaries in the e-books on the various mental health problems covered in the series.

Different strategies are used to manage moderate versus severe symptoms

Natural supplements that are as beneficial for moderately severe mental health problems include B-vitamins (especially folate), certain amino acids, several herbals, and the omega-3 essential fatty acids. Certain natural supplements can be safely combined with antidepressants and other prescription medications improving the response you can expect to get when you take a medication alone. Sometimes combining a natural supplement with a prescription medication works better than taking a natural supplement or a medication alone. For example, taking the amino acid [5-HTP in combination with a prescription antidepressant](#) may have a greater antidepressant effect than taking an antidepressant or 5-HTP alone. Some people who use this approach can reduce the dosage of their antidepressant without experiencing worsening in their symptoms of depressed mood. The e-books in this series describe integrative strategies that combine a medication and a natural supplement to treat a variety of mental health problems. Assuming that your mental health problem *improves*—or at least doesn't get worse—using an integrative approach you may find yourself in a 'win-win-win' situation in which you feel better and have fewer adverse effects on a reduced medication dosage.

Lifestyle changes often have beneficial effects on mental health in general however they are seldom enough when dealing with severe mental health problems. Adequate treatment strategies for severe mental health problems typically include a potent biological treatment such as a prescription medication, a natural supplement, or combination therapies that boost the effectiveness of a single medication. Such biological treatments directly affect the way the brain works and are often needed on a long-term basis when dealing with a severe mental health problem such as severe depressed mood, bipolar disorder and psychosis. If you are experiencing a severe mental health problem you probably feel overwhelmed and out of control much of the time and it may be very difficult to make positive changes in your lifestyle. However, once you've started taking a medication or other biological treatment and you are feeling and functioning better in your day-to-day life, simple lifestyle changes are an important part of everyone's wellness plan. For this reason I strongly encourage you to follow a daily routine that includes regular exercise, good nutrition, relaxation, adequate sleep, and stress management.

When to manage your mental health problem and when to seek advice from a healthcare professional

After you have identified one or more treatments that interest you the next step involves determining whether to use a treatment on your own or see a healthcare provider for expert advice and guidance. With the exception of prescription medications, the majority of approaches used to treat mental health problems can be safely used without seeing a healthcare provider. Examples

include most herbals, vitamins, omega-3s and other natural supplements, exercise and other ‘whole body’ therapies, changes in diet, stress management, mind-body practices and energy therapies. However ***some non-medication treatment approaches should be used only with the expert advice and guidance of a qualified healthcare provider who has considerable expertise and training.*** For example, some naturally occurring substances can cause potentially serious safety problems and it is important to get expert advice before considering trying them. The e-books on particular mental health problems include ***important safety considerations for herbals and other natural supplements when taken alone or in combination with prescription medications underscored in bold face and italics.***

If you decide to work with a health care provider the following points will help you find someone who is qualified to help you with your mental health problem.

- To identify a qualified practitioner of a therapy that interests you it’s helpful to get a referral from a health care provider you already know and respect, or a friend or relative who has tried the same approach.
- Once you’ve identified a clinician who is qualified to treat you, first try to learn everything you can about their background, including education, training, licensing, and certifications.
- When you’ve confirmed that a particular healthcare provider is experienced and knowledgeable in the treatment of your mental health problem it’s important to find out what the treatment costs.

- At your first session with your new health care provider it's important to provide a complete history of your mental health problem and treatments you've already tried including treatments that worked and those that did not work or caused adverse effects.
- Be sure to tell your new health care provider and all your other providers, about any changes in your symptoms, new or worsening medical problems, and new treatments that you decide to try.

Coming up with a treatment plan that *makes sense for you*

I've already mentioned that the most appropriate integrative treatment plan for your particular mental health problem is based on research evidence together with your personal preferences, treatments that are available where you live, and what you can and *cannot* afford. Taking all of these things into consideration means that the 'best' treatment plan is often different even when two or more people have the same mental health problem. For example, one person's anxiety may respond to a prescription medication and get even better with daily yoga or mindfulness meditation practice. However another person with similar anxiety symptoms may not benefit from the same medication (or have significant adverse effects) or yoga but might feel less anxious after reducing caffeine or refined sugar in their diet and taking a Chinese herbal formula while engaging in daily exercise. A third person with similar anxiety symptoms might improve significantly using kava and calming essential oils, and so on. The take home lesson is that there is no single 'best' treatment plan for everyone who has anxiety, depression or any other mental health problem even when symptoms are similar. The plan that is most appropriate—and most likely to be beneficial—

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depends on each person's unique symptoms in the context of their life story, values, preferences and circumstances.

In putting together a strategy that has a good chance of working for you it is important to keep in mind the particular symptoms you are experiencing, how severe they are, and *treatment approaches you are interested in trying that are available where you live and affordable*. If you've already been thinking about improving your nutrition you will probably be motivated to make healthy changes in your diet. If you've already been thinking about losing weight you will probably be motivated to start a daily exercise routine. On the other hand, even though acupuncture may be a recommended treatment for your particular mental health problem, if you get nervous just thinking about someone 'sticking needles' in you, your experience with acupuncture may be quite stressful and the results disappointing ([more](#)).

What to do if your first treatment plan doesn't work

Perhaps you've been following your current treatment plan for the amount of time recommended in the e-book on your particular mental health problem but your symptoms have not improved or have gotten worse. Or perhaps you are feeling better but you are thinking about stopping your treatment plan because of adverse effects. In either case it makes sense to re-evaluate your current treatment plan and think about making changes.

It may be especially difficult to develop an effective treatment plan the first time around if you have a serious mental health problem that has been difficult to treat in the past, if you are dealing with more than one mental health problem, or have a medical problem that is affecting your mental health or interfering with treatment. Try not to worry if your first treatment plan does not improve your

mental health problem. There are many different approaches to consider and many possible directions to take toward healing. Using the methods described in this e-book you will soon find a treatment plan that is right for you.

When re-evaluating your treatment plan it is helpful to take inventory of your symptoms by answering the same questions you answered when developing your first treatment plan. Changes in your symptoms may reflect worsening of the mental health problem you are treating, a new mental health problem or a medical problem that you haven't noticed before. In any case it is important to identify changes in your symptoms before revising your treatment plan.

Answering [standardized questions](#) on particular mental health problems can help you do this.

If you suspect that you have a medical problem it is important to seek medical care from a qualified healthcare provider right away so that you can be properly diagnosed and treated. Your healthcare provider can order laboratory studies or other appropriate medical tests that will help determine whether you have an undiagnosed medical problem. In addition to conventionally trained healthcare providers you may benefit from seeing an alternative medical practitioner (e.g. a doctor of naturopathic medicine or a Chinese medical practitioner) for diagnostic testing. Examples of diagnostic tests used in Chinese medicine and other traditional healing approaches are included in the e-books on particular mental health problems.

In addition to reviewing your symptoms and checking to see if you have a medical problem it's also important to change any circumstances in your life that may be interfering with the effectiveness of your current treatment plan. Even the best treatment may have limited beneficial effects if the day-to-day circumstances of your life are too difficult.

After taking inventory of your symptoms to find out how they have changed and checking to see if you have a medical problem just follow the same steps you used to develop your initial treatment. Using this approach you will soon develop a more effective plan. In the e-books on particular mental health problems I talk about steps to take when considering changing your treatment plan if your initial plan doesn't work ([read more](#)).

Summary of most important points

Below I've summarized the most important points in this e-book including key steps involved in developing an appropriate integrative treatment plan addressing many common mental health problems taking into account your unique history, symptoms, preferences and circumstances:

- **If you have a severe mental health problem that is interfering with your ability to work, study or be in a relationship, or if you are thinking about harming yourself or someone else, *please seek urgent care at the nearest clinic or hospital emergency room.***
- If you've recently been seen in an emergency room or hospitalized for a serious mental health problem and you are *not currently* experiencing severe symptoms, the e-books in this series can help you to better understand your mental health problem and find reliable information about non-medication treatment approaches.

- ***The chief goal of integrative mental health care is to help each person find the treatment plan that is most appropriate and effective for their mental health problem taking into account their unique symptoms, preferences and circumstances.***
- The e-books in this series are offered as a practical resource on *integrative strategies for preventing and treating* common mental health problems.
- ***If you have a medical problem that has not been diagnosed or properly treated or has recently been getting worse, I encourage you to see a physician or other qualified healthcare provider before stopping your current treatment or starting any new treatment.*** Many medical disorders can cause or worsen mental health problems.
- The first step in developing an integrative treatment plan involves ***taking inventory of your symptoms by answering a few standardized questions.*** Your answers will help you to better understand the nature and severity of your symptoms and guide you in developing an appropriate treatment plan.
- After completing an inventory of your symptoms the next step is to ***carefully review the evidence for different treatment approaches and identify treatments that address your symptoms that you are open to trying.***
- Based on your answers to the standardized questions, your treatment preferences, treatments that are available where you live and your budget, the next step involves ***developing a realistic treatment plan that make sense for you.***
- Moderately severe symptoms often respond to life style changes such as stress management, regular exercise, improved nutrition and sleep. ***If your symptoms are not severe you may be able to adequately care for your mental health needs on your own.***
- Severe symptoms of depressed mood, bipolar disorder, anxiety, psychosis and other serious mental health problems generally do not respond to life style changes alone, and may require long-term treatment with a potent

biological agent including prescription medications, certain natural supplements, or a medication plus a natural supplement. ***If you are struggling with a severe mental health problem it is prudent to get expert advice from a psychiatrist, a psychologist or other qualified health care provider with expertise in mental health.***

- ***If you need to take a prescription medication in order to function at work, in school or in society generally, making positive lifestyle changes such as exercising more often, improved nutrition, adequate sleep, and a regular stress reduction program, can significantly improve your mental health.***
- When developing a treatment plan you should first consider Tier A treatments supported by strong evidence. ***If no tier A treatments are listed for your mental health problem, or if you have already tried several tier A treatments without benefit, I encourage you to review the information in the e-book on your particular mental health problem to make sure you previously used a quality brand (i.e. if the treatment is a natural supplement) at the recommended dosage for the recommended duration.*** By the same token, ***if you previously used a whole-body, mind-body or energy approach, I encourage you to review the information in the e-book on your particular mental health problem to make sure you used that approach in a way and for a duration that would be expected to achieve consistent beneficial results.***
- ***If after reading the book on your particular mental health problem you discover that you did not previously try a Tier A treatment using a quality brand at the optimal dosage or duration, it makes sense to try the same treatment again this time taking a quality brand at a higher dosage and for a longer period of time that would more likely achieve good results.*** By the same token ***if you previously tried a whole body, mind-body or energetic approach that is known to be beneficial for your mental health problem, but without success, I encourage you try that approach again, ideally with guidance of a qualified health care provider or instructor***

while adhering to the optimal technique, frequency and duration of the approach.

- ***An important consideration when developing any new treatment plan is deciding whether to try one treatment only or two or more treatments at the same time.*** When in doubt it is generally best to keep your plan as simple as possible. ***Examples of beneficial combinations that are safe and effective, as well as unsafe combinations that should be avoided*** are included in the detailed descriptions of treatments in the e-books in this series on particular mental health problems.
- ***If your initial treatment plan isn't working after trying it for an amount of time after which you should expect beneficial results, it is prudent to see a qualified healthcare provider to obtain diagnostic tests to make sure a medical problem isn't causing your mental health problem or interfering with your response to treatment.***
- ***If your symptoms do not significantly improve after following your treatment plan it is appropriate to consider changing your treatment plan preferably to one that includes treatments in Tier A or tier B. If you've already used most or all Tier A treatments, or no Tier A treatments are listed for the mental health problem you are treating, consider using Tier B or C treatments.*** The amount of time in which you should expect to experience consistent improvement in symptoms is discussed under each treatment. In some cases it may be appropriate to continue your current treatment while adding a different treatment. ***Before combining two or more treatments first review the comments included under 'safe and effective combinations to consider' and 'unsafe combinations to avoid' for the treatments you are thinking about using together.***
- Make sure you understand important safety issues associated with the treatments you are thinking about trying including potential risks associated with particular treatment combinations. Well-known safety problems are described under the treatments covered in the e-books on

particular mental health problems. It is best to ***avoid combining two or more treatments that can potentially result in adverse effects. If you are considering combining two or more treatments after reviewing the information in the book on your particular mental health problem it is best to consult a qualified healthcare provider for expert advice and guidance.***

- ***Even if your current treatment plan is working it is important to take inventory of your symptoms from time to time.*** Answering standardized questions about your mental health problem will give you a deeper understanding of your symptoms and valuable insights about new treatments that may work better than those you've already tried.
- Continue to modify your treatment plan as needed. If your symptoms change over time the treatment plan that makes most sense for you may need to be changed. ***If you are experiencing ongoing symptoms of a serious mental health problem such as psychosis, severe depressed mood, cognitive impairment or substance abuse, and you are not consistently feeling and functioning better after trying two different treatment plans following the above steps, you've come to the limits of what the e-books in this series can offer. In this case I strongly encourage you to seek professional care.***
- ***If you are experiencing moderately severe symptoms that do not interfere with your ability to work, go to school or function in society generally, and you don't feel consistently better after trying at least two different treatment plans for the recommended time, you may be able to safely stop treatment.*** For example, many people who have moderately severe symptoms of depressed mood, anxiety and other mental health problems feel better over time even in the absence of ongoing treatment. For moderately severe symptoms you can expect to benefit from positive life-style changes including regular exercise, adequate sleep, a healthy diet, and stress management.

Taking first steps towards improving your mental health—now it's up to you...

Now that you've finished reading this e-book and you have a good understanding of what integrative mental healthcare is all about you're ready to take the next step and apply what you've learned to your particular mental health problem. Whether your goal is maintaining your current level of wellness, finding a treatment that works better than the one you're presently using, or recovering from a serious mental health problem, you will find a great deal of practical information about a broad range of treatment choices in the e-books in this [series](#).

My hope is that this introductory e-book and others in the series will help you achieve your person goal of improved mental health. Remember, getting better and staying healthy is not just about taking a medication, a natural supplement or using any other treatment. It's about ***embracing a new way of thinking about your physical and mental health, making positive lifestyle changes, and staying committed to an holistic care plan that makes sense for you.***

Going deeper

After reading this short e-book on the principles and methods of integrative mental health care you may want to learn more. You can find in-depth information about integrative mental health care in my other books:

- [Textbook of Integrative Mental Health Care](#)
- [Integrative Mental Health Care: A Therapist's Handbook](#)
- [Complementary and Alternative Treatments in Mental Health Care](#)
- [Chinese Medical Psychiatry: A Textbook and Clinical Manual](#)

Finding quality products and services on the Internet

General resources on non-medication treatment approaches

- [The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health \(NCCIH\)](#) is part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). NCCIH is dedicated to exploring complementary and alternative healing practices in the context of rigorous science, training complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) researchers, and disseminating authoritative information to the public and professionals. The site contains extensive reviews of research on all non-medication treatment approaches. A citation index contains over 200,000 citations of studies on all areas of non-conventional medicine indexed in the National Library of Medicine beginning in 1966. The section includes valuable advice on how to find qualified practitioners of alternative and integrative medicine. The site includes information **en Español**.
- [International Network of Integrative Mental health](#) is a global nonprofit organization for integrative mental health clinicians and researchers. The organization is dedicated to advancing an agenda for integrative whole person mental health care through education, research, networking and advocacy. The site includes conference announcements, live expert-hosted webinars, links to valuable on-line resources, a media library, archived newsletters, and an extensive library of peer-reviewed publications covering all areas of complementary, alternative and integrative approaches for preventing or treating mental health problems. Dr. Lake is a founding board member and former chair of this organization.

- [American Psychiatric Association Caucus on Integrative Medicine](#) is a special-interest group within the American Psychiatric Association. Its members are psychiatrists interested in all treatment approaches that can benefit mental health problems. Caucus members are committed to understanding both conventional treatments such as medications and psychotherapy, as well as "alternative" and "complementary" approaches such as herbals, other natural products, mind-body practices and many others.

Resources on dietary supplements (no cost)

- [National Institutes of Health Office of Dietary Supplements](#) includes an extensive on-line library of dietary supplement fact sheets for widely used herbals and other natural products. Different versions are available for consumers and health professionals. The site includes frequently asked questions (FAQs) and links to scientific monographs. The site includes some information **en Español**.
- [Medline Plus Supplement Information](#) is a service of the U.S. National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health. It includes a comprehensive library of on-line monographs on prescription drugs as well as herbals and other natural product supplements. Each monograph includes safety information on adverse effects and interactions. The site also includes free mental health screening tools, educational brochures, videos and podcasts on common mental health problems.
- [Drugs.com](#) includes a comprehensive library of on-line monographs on prescription medications and natural products including extensive information on adverse effects. It includes an on-line tool for checking
<http://www.theintegrativementalhealthsolution.com/>

interactions. Different versions are available for consumers and health professionals. The information on the site is also available **en Español**.

- [National Herbalists Association of Australia](#) is the oldest natural therapies association in Australia, and the only national professional body of medical herbalists. Their mission is to serve and support membership (Medical Herbalists and Naturopaths) and to promote and protect the profession and practice of herbal medicine. This website is a portal to on-line resources covering all aspects of herbal medicine as well as complementary and alternative medicine in general. It includes links to valuable resources on research, nutrition, herbals and other natural product supplements, professional associations, educational resources, and reputable distributors and suppliers of herbals and other natural products.
- [The World Health Organization's \(WHO\) traditional medicine](#) portal provides a traditional medicine fact sheet and links to worldwide health care resources. WHO seeks to promote international collaboration and cooperation in the study and use of traditional healing approaches in mental health care.

Resources on natural products and other non-medication treatments (fee)

- [ConsumerLab.com](#) provides independent test results and information to help consumers and healthcare professionals evaluate health, wellness, and nutrition products. ConsumerLab is a certification company and enables companies of all sizes to have their products voluntarily tested for potential inclusion in its list of Approved Quality products and bear its seal of approval. The site is a valuable consumer resource for evaluating

different natural products and brands and identifying brands that are both safe and effective.

- [Natural Medicines](#) is a subscription service that provides valuable information on natural products and other non-medication approaches. Like Consumerlab.com, Natural Medicines provides independent reviews of supplements that are authoritative and easy to read. The site provides links to valuable databases on natural products and other approaches. It also includes consumer monographs, patient handouts and offers continuing education credit on different topics to health professionals.
- [Herb Research Foundation](#) includes expert compilations on specific herbals that contain carefully selected articles, studies, and discussions by experts that are available as downloads or in print form. The work of the Herb Research Foundation is based on its dedicated holdings of more than 300,000 scientific articles on thousands of herbs.

The majority of herbals and other natural supplements used to treat medical or mental health problems are safe when used appropriately at recommended dosages. However, like prescription medications, some natural supplements can cause serious adverse effects if taken at doses that are too high or in combination with certain prescription medications or other supplements. To minimize the risks associated with prescription medications or natural supplements ***it is important to find out about potential safety issues before starting any new biological treatment, or before combining a medication or natural supplement with any other biological treatment.*** As a general rule it is always best to ***avoid combining any two or more treatments that are known to***

potentially be unsafe when taken together. For example, you should avoid taking a combination of a particular medication and a natural supplement known to result in a toxic interaction. On the other hand, if a particular combination of two (or more) biological treatments is established as both safe and effective for your particular mental health problem, it is reasonable to try that combination when developing your treatment plan ([more](#)).

This section offers practical tips on how to use non-medication approaches to treat a particular mental health problem or (in some cases) prevent it from returning. It includes specific information about effective and safe dosages of natural products, and effective and appropriate techniques, session length when whole body, mind-body and energy therapies are used. This section comments on the duration of treatment needed to achieve consistent beneficial effects (when known), and provides important safety comments on treatments that may cause serious adverse effects or may result in potentially toxic interactions when taken in combination with certain prescription medications. This information is included to help you minimize the risk of adverse effects or potentially dangerous interactions when two or more supplements or medications are being used ([continue](#)).

Every e-book in the series includes important safety information pertaining to treatments discussed in that e-book. You should always notify your healthcare provider when you are considering taking an herbal medicine or other natural supplement alone or together with a prescription medication. Healthcare professionals are very knowledgeable about safety and will be happy to provide

information about any potential safety concerns associated with the treatment you are considering. If you cannot afford to see a qualified healthcare provider or one is not available where you live on-line resources provide valuable information about safety issues related to both prescription medications and other natural supplements used to treat mental health problems. I've included links to several websites at the end of this e-book that will help you [find quality brands of supplements and safety information](#) about a wide variety of treatment approaches. I strongly encourage you to use these resources when you have questions or concerns about safety that are not addressed in the e-books on particular mental health problems ([more](#)).

- What are my symptoms and how do they affect me in my daily life?
Describe the way your mental health problem affects how you feel or how you function at work, school or in a relationship in simple terms, eg, 'constant fear,' 'feeling sad,' 'no energy,' 'hard to concentrate,' etc.
- What factors in my environment might be causing my symptom(s) or making them worse? For example, is there a medical problem? Are you having stress due to work or a relationship problem, etc?
- Does someone in my family have a medical or mental health problem that provides a clue to my own mental health problem? Some mental health problems run in families, for example, many people who are severely depressed, bipolar or have psychotic symptoms have relatives with the same mental health problem.
- Do I have a medical disorder that could be related to my mental health problem? Many medical problems cause or worsen mental health problems. For example, depressed mood is often associated with heart disease and diabetes; bipolar disorder can sometimes be associated with a

serious head injury or stroke, etc. If you think your symptoms may be related to a medical problem it is important to seek medical evaluation and treatment for that problem. Successfully treating an underlying medical problem often alleviates the mental health problem.

- What prescription medications or natural products have I tried in the past for my mental health problem? What has worked and what has not? Make a list of all treatments previously tried for your mental health problem. Please include complementary, alternative and conventional treatments like medications and psychotherapy.
- If a particular treatment worked for the same mental health problem in the past why did I decide to stop using it? How much time went by before my symptoms returned? When they returned were my symptoms the same or different? For example, did the treatment stop working? Were there adverse effects? Was it too expensive? Did I stop taking it after my symptoms improved? Answers to these questions will provide valuable clues about what treatments to try next.
- Describe your general state of health in the past 2 to 3 months. For example, have you been healthy? Have you been losing or gaining weight? Is there a problem with fatigue? Were you recently diagnosed with a medical problem?
- Describe your nutrition and activity level. For example, do you maintain a healthy diet? Do you exercise on a regular basis?
- Describe your general level of stress in the past 2 or 3 months. For example, has work been more stressful recently? Is a problem with your primary relationship or family causing stress? Are other major stresses affecting your day-to-day life?

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- Is alcohol or other substance use a problem? For example, does drinking or using a drug interfere with your social or work life? Have there been legal consequences related to drinking or drug use?
- Do you have problems sleeping at night or with staying awake during the day? For example, problems sleeping may be related to a mental health or medical problem, or they may be caused by alcohol or other substance abuse or the adverse effects of a medication.
- Have tests been done in the past 2 to 3 months to find out what is causing your problem(s)? For example, have you been evaluated using conventional diagnostic tests of the blood, urine, or diagnostic tests used in non-Western medical traditions, for example pulse diagnosis used in Chinese medicine, or homeopathic assessment, etc? If so what were the findings and what is your medical diagnosis if any?
- Please list all medications or supplements including herbals and other natural products you are currently taking including dosages and times of day you take them. Include the reasons you are taking them and how long you've been taking them. This information can provide clues about whether treatments are having beneficial or harmful effects. It can also help clarify whether symptoms may be related to adverse effects or interactions between medications and natural products.
- Are you currently being treated by a conventionally trained mental health provider or an alternative medical practitioner for any medical or mental health problem? If so include the kind of practitioner and the problem for which you are being treated.
- Do you think that cultural, religious or spiritual issues are affecting your health or mental health?

If you think you have an undiagnosed or rapidly worsening medical problem I encourage you to go to an urgent care center or find a qualified healthcare provider for expert advice. In this case you may need to be evaluated using specialized diagnostic tests of the blood, urine, organs or brain.

In addition to diagnostic tests used in conventional Western medicine many non-Western healing traditions use a variety of approaches to detect changes in “subtle” energy that may provide clues about underlying energetic causes of medical, mental or emotional symptoms. For example, practitioners of Tibetan medicine, Chinese medicine and Ayurveda use information obtained from measuring the pulse to identify energetic ‘imbalances’ associated with illness. Different mental and emotional symptoms are associated with characteristic features in the pulse. Even in cases where there is no *apparent* medical problem, identifying the ‘energetic’ imbalance that manifests as your particular symptom ‘pattern’ may help you develop a treatment plan that uses different approaches including a natural supplement, a mind-body practice, energy work or other approaches that may alleviate the causes of symptoms and restore your body and mind to a healthy state of balance.

If you are experiencing a potentially life-threatening medical or mental health problem you should seek immediate emergency care. Symptoms that may point to a serious or medical or mental health emergency include:

- severe headaches
- dizziness
- changes in vision
- sudden onset difficulty speaking or understanding speech
- recent change in the level of consciousness
- feelings of disorientation
- auditory or visual hallucinations

If you are having thoughts of harming yourself or someone else please go to the nearest hospital emergency room or urgent care center ([more](#)).

5-hydroxy-tryptophan (5-HTP)

- **Name of treatment and category:** 5-HTP is an amino acid that enters the brain more readily and has antidepressant effects at lower dosages compared to a related amino acid called L-tryptophan
- **How the treatment works (where known):** increases brain serotonin levels resulting in improved mood
- **Dosages (for natural products) or frequency of use (for somatic, mind-body or energy approaches):** 300mg/day may be as effective as conventional antidepressants for moderate depressed mood; dosages up to 600mg/day (divided into 2 or 3 separate doses) may be effective against more severe depressed mood

- **Examples of safe and effective treatment combinations:** safe to combine with most antidepressants to boost their effectiveness including some cases of severe depressed mood that have not responded to medications only.
- **Comments about adverse effects and warnings pertaining to treatment combinations that may result in potentially unsafe interactions and should be avoided:** Dosages greater than 100mg are often sedating and should be taken at bedtime; **Warning: combining 5-HTP with a MAOI may result in a serious medical condition (i.e. serotonin syndrome) that includes anxiety, agitation and elevated blood pressure. This combination is potentially dangerous and should be avoided.**
- **Average duration of treatment needed to achieve beneficial results:** Many persons who take 5-HTP at dosages between 50 and 300mg/day experience significant improvement in depressed mood within 3 weeks.

Many non-medication approaches used to treat mental health problems or maintain optimal wellness are based on life-style choices that cost nothing but require an on-going commitment to your health. These approaches include changing your diet to include healthier foods such as grains, fresh vegetables and lean meat while cutting down on unhealthy foods such as saturated fats and refined sugar. Healthy lifestyle choices also include regular exercise, getting enough sleep, and using simple relaxation techniques for stress management. In addition to positive lifestyle choices, many natural supplements have beneficial effects on mental health in general and can be used to 'treat' the root causes of

specific mental health problems including depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, psychosis, ADHD and others.

Natural supplements used in 'traditional' healing go beyond herbals and include complex herbal formulas (i.e. in Chinese medicine and Ayurveda), vitamins, essential fatty acids, amino acids, trace minerals and multi-nutrient formulas.

Many natural supplements can be safely combined with prescription medications increasing their effectiveness and, in some cases, reducing adverse effects caused by them. A variety of *non-biological* approaches are also beneficial for maintaining optimal well-being or treating particular mental health problems. Examples include biofeedback, bright light therapy, mind-body approaches such as mindfulness meditation, yoga and tai chi, and energy therapies such as acupuncture, healing touch, Reiki and qigong.

Healthcare providers increasingly recommend a broad range of *complementary and alternative* treatments in addition to prescription medications for both medical and mental health problems. Many of these so-called 'traditional' healing approaches have been used for centuries or longer for maintaining optimal health and for treating specific mental health problems. In recent decades courses on 'traditional' healing approaches have been taught in medical schools, nursing schools and advanced seminars for psychiatrists and psychologists in the U.S., Canada and many European countries ([more](#)).

To increase your chances for getting positive results it is important to use approaches that interest you and that you are motivated to try. *For practical*

purposes it is also important to use approaches that are available where you live and affordable. For example, if you find out that a particular Chinese herbal formula is beneficial for improving your memory problem but a quality brand of that herbal formula is difficult to obtain where you live or very expensive, it doesn't make sense to rely on this particular treatment approach. With some investigation using the e-books in this series and the [internet resources](#) at the end of this e-book you will be able to identify many treatment choices that are available where you live and affordable. It may be helpful to keep a journal in order to track your progress and make notes on any problems you encounter along the way. Your notes will provide helpful information if you need to re-evaluate your initial treatment plan in case it isn't working.

If you've already tried several tier A treatments for your mental health problem and they haven't helped or you feel better but are experiencing troublesome adverse effects it makes sense to consider trying tier B treatments. Along the same lines, if you haven't previously tried tier A treatments because they are not available where you live or too expensive, it also makes sense to try tier B treatments. By following the steps outlined in this e-book you will be able to develop integrative strategies using treatments that are safe, effective, locally available and affordable.

There is no single best treatment approach for everyone who has a particular mental health problem. The important thing is to remain open-minded to trying new approaches if your first treatment plan isn't successful. Using the simple steps outlined in the e-book on your particular mental health problem you will soon identify an integrative strategy that is safe, effective and fits your budget.

The plan that works best for you may include two tier A treatments, a tier A treatment in combination with a tier B treatment, two or more tier B treatments, a tier B treatment and a tier C treatment, or many other possibilities.

The e-books in this series provide examples of safe integrative strategies using treatments supported by different levels of evidence. Whatever treatment you decide to try, I strongly encourage you to follow that plan for at least two months once you *start* to feel better. At that time your mental health goal will shift from treating symptoms to maintaining an optimal state of wellness. You may discover that your improved mental health will give you the motivation you need to continue the treatment plan that helped you feel better in the first place. I hope that when you've reached that point doing what works to stay well will become an important part of your daily life.

I can't emphasize the following point strongly enough. ***If you are struggling with a severe mental health problem that is interfering with your ability to work, to study or be in a relationship, or if you are thinking about harming yourself or someone else, you should seek immediate emergency care.*** The material in this e-book and all e-books in the series is not intended to substitute for professional medical advice or emergency medical or psychiatric care.

If you are seeing a mental health professional for a severe mental health problem or you've recently been hospitalized for a severe mental health problem, it is important to tell your healthcare provider about any non-medication treatments you are considering trying, especially if you are taking a prescription medication. Your healthcare provider will thank you for sharing this

information because it will help him or her know how to advise you about safe non-medication treatment choices while taking a prescription medication. Open, honest communication about what you are taking will also build a relationship of trust and cooperation with your healthcare provider ([more](#)).