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Health & Fitness

Herbs for the Mind: What Science Tells Us about Nature's Remedies for Depression, Stress, Memory Loss, and Insomnia

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Two reputable psychiatrists, professors at Duke University, step outside the confines of the physicians' desk reference to report on four "natural remedies" that may have value in a number of ways. In four well-researched and readable chapters the doctors present what is known about St. John's Wort, Kava, Gingko, and Valerian. Marketed in health food stores and on the Internet as dietary supplements, these remedies are less regulated than prescription drugs. The authors express both enthusiasm and caution.

> *The truth is depression hurts, stress kills, anxiety is unnerving, insomnia is debilitating, and faulty memory is a major disadvantage in today's demanding world… If we can find help on the shelves of retail stores, saving the time and cost of a doctor's visit and a prescription… good for us. But woe be to those who seek the 'quick fix' remedy without educating themselves thoroughly.*

Most people who use these medications are treating themselves, and may not even ask or tell their doctors, though they are encouraged to do so. With this book, physicians—too often lagging behind in alternative medicine—can catch up with and guide their patients in this increasingly popular and important but hazardous realm. Much remains unknown, including mechanisms and effectiveness of therapy with these agents. Packaging of herbs is variable, standardization incomplete. The authors provide a glossary of terms, references, and a resource list including publications, organizations, and websites. There is now a PDR for herbal medicines!

Doctors Davidson and Connor write responsibly and well for a general and professional audience. The chapters on St. John's Wort and Kava summarize what is known about the brain chemistry and pharmacology of depression and anxiety. Memory loss and dementia are the focus of the Gingko chapter, which also touches on circulatory problems, tinnitus, asthma, etc. The final chapter, on Valerian, discusses approaches to insomnia but should have included a section on the stages or architecture of sleep.

Mental health professionals know less about brain chemistry than the layperson might expect, given the heft of medical textbooks. Herbs for the Mind balances the weight of knowledge and the lightness of ignorance with common sense, hope, and the promise of more and better research.

E. James Lieberman