

HERBAL ALTERNATIVES FOR TREATING ANXIETY

Plants have long been used to treat central nervous system (CNS) disorders like anxiety. Many herbal allies are useful in tinctures and infusions, aromatherapy and as flower essences. The following are used internally as tinctures, infusions or decoctions:

Passiflora incarnata (Passionflower), known as the flower to pacify the spirit, is a wonderful relaxing remedy. It will relieve chronic insomnia and many stress-related symptoms. It is non-addictive and allows one to wake refreshed and alert in the morning. It is both sedative and antispasmodic, relaxing tension in the muscles, calming the nerves and lessening pain. For anxiety, David Winston combines Passionflower with fresh milky oat, blue vervain and motherwort. (Winston, 215)

For people with nervous tics and women with menopausal anxiety, ***Verbena hastata (Blue vervain)*** in combination with ***Withania somnifera (Ashwaganda)*** and ***Scutellaria lateriflora (Skullcap)*** can be very useful. (Winston, 207)

Wolfiporia extensa (Poria Cocos) is anti-inflammatory, anti-tumor, a topo inhibitor, immune system enhancer/modulator, insulintrophic/anti-diabetic; anti-emetic, and it improves learning and memory. The bark is used in TCM to enhance vital spirit. Taoist adepts assert it is useful when one strives to attain enlightenment by helping overcome anxiety, worry and fear. It is also an immune system tonic (spleen), and may improve memory and cognition in old age.

A body under stress is more vulnerable to free radical damage. ***Vaccinium myrtillus (Bilberry)***, ***Ginkgo biloba*** and ***Silybum marianum (Milk thistle)*** are all rich in flavonoids that neutralize free radicals. Ginkgo is an anticoagulant/blood thinner. A peripheral and cerebral vasodilator, it helps those with impaired circulation. It is often sold, however, as an aid to "intelligence" and used by students when cramming for tests, etc. Under these misguided uses it causes headaches. Milk thistle may inhibit hepatocytes in excess; pregnancy may alter therapeutic window. And without an ongoing stress, using Silybum or its extracted silymarins on general principle can actually depress normal liver function. (Moore)

Adaptogens

Adaptogens enhance mood and relieve stress. The following adaptogens are specifically helpful for their anxiolytic (anti-anxiety) effects:

- *Withania somnifera* (Ashwagandha)
- *Gynostemma pentaphyllum* (Jiagulan)
- *Ganoderma lucidum* (Reishi)
- *Schisandra chinensis* (Schisandra) are

Nervines

Nerve tonics (nervines) also have anxiolytic activity, and the following are helpful when dealing with stress:

- *Verbena* (Blue vervain)
- *Matricaria chamomilla* (Chamomile)
- *Avena* (Milky oats)
- *Crataegus* (Hawthorn)
- *Tilia* (Linden)
- *Leonurus cardiaca* (Motherwort)
- *Passiflora* (Passionflower)
- *Scutellaria* (Skullcap).

Some nervines also have antidepressant effects and can be incredibly helpful when dealing with anxiety that includes depression. These nervines include:

- *Melissa* (Lemon balm)
- *Hypericum perforatum* (St. John's wort)
- *Albizia* (Mimosa)
- *Lavandula* (Lavender)
- *Rosmarinus* (Rosemary). (Winston)

To help prevent panic attacks and promote relaxation, consider:

- *Nepeta Cataria* (Catnip)
- *Matricaria chamomilla* (Chamomile)
- *viburnum opulus* (Cramp bark)
- *Piper methysticum* (Kava)
- *Humulus Lupulus* (Hops)
- *Tilia* (Linden)
- *Leonurus cardiaca* (Motherwort)
- *Passiflora* (Passionflower)
- *Scutellaria* (Skullcap)

***Melissa officinalis* (Lemon Balm)**, known as the flower of bees, influences the limbic system in the brain that is concerned with mood and temperament. As a sedative, it enhances relaxation and induces natural sleep, calming tension and anxiety, and even mania and hysteria. It can be taken as a tea frequently throughout the day and at night to help with insomnia. (McIntyre)

***Foeniculum vulgare* (Fennel)** relieves anxiety-related gastrointestinal upsets, reduces flatulence and abdominal tension and relaxes the large intestine. It is most effective as a tea, before or after meals.

***Tanacetum parthenium* (Feverfew)** and ***Filipendula ulmaria* (Meadowsweet)** can both help with anxiety-induced headaches. Feverfew also relieves migraines. Neither have side effects.

***Hypericum perforatum* (St. John's Wort)**, known as the flower of light, is a wonderful remedy for the nervous system, relaxing tension and anxiety and lifting the spirits. (McIntyre) According to Weed, a dropperful of St. John's Wort tincture is the remedy to reach for when one feels like they are on edge and like anything will push them over it. The dose can be repeated safely several times an hour as needed. This herb is nerve nourishing and strengthening, and relieves immediate anxiety while helping prevent future distress.

***Scutellaria* (Skullcap)** or ***Valeriana officinalis* (Valerian)**, taken at bedtime promote sleep and aid in preventing panic attacks at night. Skullcap tincture is less addictive and often more effective.

10-20 drops of fresh plant tincture or 1-2 dropperfuls of dried plant tincture can be taken. Herbal tranquilizers are safer than prescription tranquilizers, but are best reserved for occasional use. Valerian is the best known. *Valeriana officinalis* (Valerian) is a nervine that may be used for any situation in which tension and anxiety cause problems, either psychological or physical. Its sedative actions are due to its content of valepotriates and the sesquiterpene constituents of the volatile oil. (Hoffman) The valepotriates are transformed into homobaldrinal, which has sedative properties. Sesquiterpenes have been shown to have a direct action on the amygdala, which is a brain structure in the limbic system. The amygdala is responsible for feelings of fear and anxiety. Valerenic acid has been shown to inhibit the breakdown of GABA in the brain, resulting in sedation. GABA is the principal inhibitory neurotransmitter in the nervous system. Another compound present in valerian extracts is a lignan, hydroxypinoresinol, and it binds to benzodiazepine receptors, which are GABA_A receptors and the target of benzodiazepines, i.e. tranquilizers and sedatives. (biology.stackexchange.com) It is important to note that the dried plant, used consistently for a period of time, can induce "Valerianism," a state of emotional lability similar to what was formerly encountered with bromide abuse. The condition reverses quickly if the Valerian is stopped. (Moore)

Because its action can be quite strong, it is best to begin with a five-drop dose, which can be repeated every 10-15 minutes until you are calm (and probably asleep). To avoid addiction, use valerian root as a tea or a tincture, not in capsules, and take it for no more than three weeks.

David Hoffman noted that Ellingwood considered ***Humulus lupulus (Hops)***, in the Cannabaceae family, specific for “marked cases of nerve irritation and wakefulness where anxiety and worry are the cause.” Anne McIntyre, in “Flower Power,” expands on this, noting that hops can relieve insomnia and ease anxiety by reducing tension in muscles throughout the body. It is a particularly good remedy for women, as it has an estrogenic action, making it excellent for any problem around menopause.

McIntyre recommends ***Cypripedium pubescens (Lady's slipper)***, also known as the flower of serenity, as a useful ally for anxiety, as it acts as a tonic to the nervous system. It is a good remedy for nervous exhaustion, for depletion after illness, for anxiety, tension, restlessness, over-excitement and insomnia. Its antispasmodic properties relax smooth muscle and relieve pain, making it excellent for exhaustion and anxiety following childbirth. And as a diaphoretic, it can be useful for fevers accompanied by restlessness and anxiety. It is an endangered species and must be used only when cultivated, never picked in the wild.

Lavandula officinalis (Lavender) relaxes the digestive tract, soothing away spasm related to tension and anxiety. (McIntyre)

Eschscholzia californica (CA poppy), the flower of gold, is a far less powerful cousin to the opium poppy, making it a safe and useful herbal remedy to calm excitability, tension, insomnia and anxiety. Its antispasmodic action relaxes muscles throughout the body. Through its calming action in the nervous system, it also influences the heart and circulation. It slows down rapid heartbeat and relieves palpitations and helps lower blood pressure. It can be thought of as a gentle balancer to the emotions and calming in times of stress. (McIntyre) According to Michael Moore, Poppy is a bradycardic/hypotensive and causes miscellaneous pregnancy weirdness.

McIntyre also talks about ***Matricaria chamomilla (Chamomile)***, the flower of equilibrium, as a symbol of energy and patience in adversity because of its great ability to restore equilibrium and support the nervous system. Its constituent azulene has soothing properties that calm anxiety and nervousness, making chamomile excellent for tense, stressed out people who tend to be hyperactive and highly sensitive, prone to digestive problems and allergies. It relaxes smooth muscle throughout the body. It is specifically indicated for people with erratic moods - agitated, fine and then anxious, all within minutes. (Winston)

Combining Chamomile with catnip, hops or valerian is especially useful for people who suffer from nervous stomach and diarrhea due to stress. Chamomile can also be mixed fifty/fifty with apple juice and given to children who deal with nightmares. (Winston)

An iced tea infusion of the bulk herb (as opposed to tea bags or capsules) ***Urtica dioica (Stinging nettle)*** seasoned with salt, strengthens the adrenals, relieving anxiety and building focused energy. (Susun Weed)

***Avena sativa* (Oatstraw)** infusion is another herb used for anxiety. It has a softer, more mellow taste, and is good with honey. Making a green oat tincture is much more powerful than drinking the infusion. It is especially useful for those whose anxiety is combined with excessive nervous energy. Another alternative is a hot bath with lemon balm or oatstraw; an ancient remedy for bad cases of the “nerves.” According to David Winston, “fresh milky oat extract is a superb food for the nervous system. It is a slow-acting tonic that calms shattered nerves, relieves emotional instability, and helps restore a sense of peace and tranquility to overstressed, angry and chronically upset people.”

***Leonurus cardiaca* (Motherwort)** tincture can also be used to fight anxiety. It will does not induce mind numbing or sleepiness, and a dose of 10-20 drops can safely be taken as often as every ten minutes, as needed, to calm and soothe sore spirits. The tincture can be taken every day.

***Rosmarinus officinalis* (Rosemary)**, the flower of loyalty, makes a great heart, brain and nervous system remedy when taken as a tea. Renaissance herbalist Wilhelm Ryeff, wrote of rosemary: “The spirits of the Heart and entire body feel joy from this drink which dispels all despondency and worry.” (McIntyre) By increasing flow of blood to the brain, it relaxes tense muscles. Its warming effect stimulates the heart and general circulation, improving overall vitality.

***Salvia apiana* (White sage)** may act like valium to relieve anxiety. Some *Salvia* species contain cineole and camphor that are pain and anxiety relievers. Diterpenoids in sage relax gut smooth muscle.

“Sage is our everyday plant. It is a spirit plant. If you don’t have it, everything is going to bother you. You drink it by putting a leaf in cool water everyday. You are going to be calm enough to be rational. It will enhance any medicine you take and protect you for the toxicity of medicines. It tickles your spirit, your conscience, and helps you keep your integrity.”
Chumash Healer Cecilia Garcia

Garcia’s prescription for anxiety is fascinating:

Sleep with a quarter pound of sagebrush leaves and stems in a sack, and avoid meat for one week. On the seventh evening, boil seven leaves of ***Eriodictyon crassifolium* (Yerba Santa)** and seven leaves of ***Datura wrightii* (Datura)** in two quarts of water until the house is filled with fragrance. Make a tea with half teaspoon of California sagebrush leaves and a mug of water. Drink the tea while vaporizing over the gently steaming leaves of *Eriodictyon crassifolium* and *Datura wrightii*. Before bed that evening, get a massage with the oil made of four leaves of ***Nicotiana glauca* (tobacco)** and four leaves of ***Salvia apiana* (White sage)** brewed in two quarts of seawater that has been steeped in the sun for several hours. Then gently boil the sun tea until the house smells of the fragrance. Add a portion of this to baby oil to make the massage oil. Massage especially under the arms and butt. For the next two

or three weeks, drink hot chocolate every night made as follows: Melt two tablespoons of traditional hot chocolate, like Chocolate Ibarra, in a mug of hot water. Dissolve the chocolate and add a leaf of *Salvia apiana* (White Sage) and a leaf of ***Artemisia douglasiana* (Mugwort)** and steep for several minutes before drinking. As the anxiety attacks decrease, continue for the next week or two drinking white sage tea made as follows: Boil a mug of water and add a stick of cinnamon and a leaf of *Salvia apiana*. Mugwort is a uterine vasodilator, so it's contraindicated during pregnancy.

Garcia also suggests that a tea made from the flowers and leaves of ***Trichostema lanatum* (Woolly bluecurl)** may relieve anxiety, working like benzodiazepine drugs.

She adds that a tea made from ***Rose californica* (Rose)** may soothe people and lighten their loads. Drinking the tea relieves anxiety so they're not so irritated in the world.