

Alternatives to Pharmaceuticals

A Digital Resource



Introduction

While a tremendous amount of resources are dedicated to developing pharmaceutical treatments for brain health conditions, many impairments associated with these challenges are difficult to improve with first-line medicines. Medications can also bring troublesome side effects along with symptom alleviation. Even for those who do find significant value in medications, it may help to supplement this regimen with other types of interventions to round out a comprehensive treatment plan.

This guide outlines a wide range of non-pharmaceutical options that may be helpful to those managing mental health conditions.

DISCLAIMER:

The following guidelines and resources are not a replacement for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment, should not be construed as the provision of advice or recommendations, and should not be relied upon as the basis for any decision or action, including without limitation the diagnosis or treatment of any health problem.

If you or a loved one are in crisis, call a licensed mental health professional or seek out crisis resources. If you or a loved one are in immediate danger, you should contact crisis resources.

> Flip to our Quick Resource Guide to find contact information for crisis text, chat, and hotlines.

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Section I:

Lifestyle Changes

While many treatments for brain health conditions, especially Serious Psychiatric Illnesses (SPIs), need to be prescribed and monitored by mental health professionals, lifestyle interventions can be cost-effective and have a profound impact on an individual's health and overall quality of life. Moreover, healthy lifestyle choices have been shown to have a significant, positive impact on mental health, whether or not you manage a diagnosable condition.

Physical Activity and Exercise

Staying active is an essential component of a healthy lifestyle. [Aerobic exercises](#) like jogging, swimming, walking, and gardening have proven to ease symptoms of depression and anxiety. While [exercise](#) — planned, structured, and repetitive body movements to improve fitness — generates the most health benefits, physical activity like regular walking and household chores may also improve mood.

Exercise can also improve mental health by:

- Offering stress relief
- Improving self-esteem
- Increasing energy and endurance
- Improving cognitive function
- Improving the quality of sleep



TIP

There are many different ways to stay active — try a range to find the practice that resonates with you and set reasonable goals.

- Aim for at least 30 minutes of exercise of moderate intensity 3-5 days a week to reap the health benefits.

Section I:

Lifestyle Changes

Nutrition

The effect of one's diet on mental health is a rapidly growing area of study called Nutritional Psychiatry. Eating high-quality foods that contain the essential amount of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants is beneficial for both the brain and the intestinal microbiome (the collection of microorganisms in the digestive tract that limits inflammation and mediates the neural pathways between the gut and brain). On the other hand, processed and refined foods high in sugar increase inflammation and impair brain function. These types of foods can also worsen symptoms of brain health conditions.

Hydration is also a critical aspect of diet and nutrition.

Daily recommendations vary by age, sex, pregnancy, and breastfeeding status.

TIP  **Increase consumption of brain healthy foods and reduce consumption of unhealthy foods.**

- This is a general recommendation, but everyone is different.
- Consult a medical professional to discuss what foods they recommend you increase or avoid in your diet based on your specific health needs.



Section I:

Lifestyle Changes

Nutrition

The foods listed below have been found to significantly impact brain health.

Brain Healthy Foods

- Low Glycemic Index (GI) foods, including many listed below
- Berries (strawberries, blackberries, blueberries)
- Green, leafy vegetables (kale, spinach, collards, broccoli)
- Legumes (beans, lentils, soybeans)
- Whole grains (brown rice, barley, oatmeal, whole-grain bread, pasta)
- Omega-3 sources (salmon, sardines, tuna, flaxseeds, avocados, walnuts)
- Nuts with Vitamin E (sunflower seeds, almonds, hazelnuts)
- Healthy fats (olive oil, canola oil)
- Dark chocolate
- Eggs
- Lean meats (poultry, pork, beef)

Foods to Minimize for Better Brain Health

- High Glycemic Index foods (cakes, cookies, potatoes, watermelon, pineapple, sweetened dairy products)
- Sugar-sweetened beverages (sodas, fruit juice, sports drinks, specialty coffee)
- Preservatives
- Fried or fast food
- Processed meat
- Processed grains (pasta, white rice, unbleached flour often in snack foods)
- Alcohol, aside from a moderate amount of wine (1-2 glasses per day)

Section I:

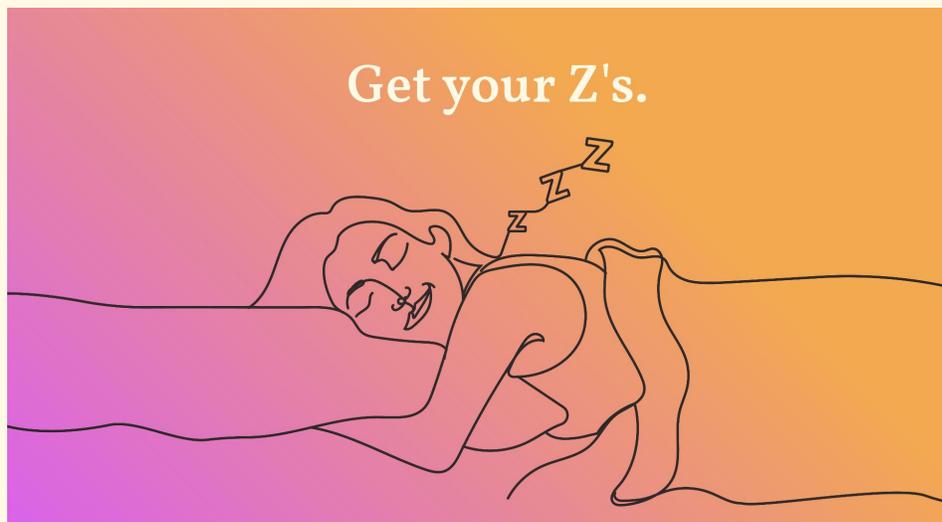
Lifestyle Changes

Sleep

Sleep is a critical time for our bodies and minds to recover. Sleep deficiency can impact our ability to regulate our emotions and is a risk factor for the development of many mental health issues like depression. At the same time, mental health conditions like anxiety, depression, and schizophrenia, are often linked to poor sleep quantity or quality. Psychiatric medications can also cause side effects from insomnia to oversleeping, complicating matters.

The CDC advises that adults get between 7 and 9 hours of sleep per day depending on their age, while youth and adolescents may need significantly more than that. Meeting or exceeding this recommendation can make a big impact on your mental health.

If you are struggling with poor quality of sleep, your physician and mental health professionals may be able to help, especially if a sleep disorder could be present. You can also implement recommended measures to improve your sleep quality through lifestyle changes.



Section I:

Lifestyle Changes

Recommendations to Improve Sleep Quality

- Go to bed and get up at the same time every day.
- Avoid ingesting stimulants like nicotine and caffeine in the evening. Alcohol can also reduce sleep quality.
- Avoid light-emitting screens before going to bed, as they can stimulate your internal clock. The CDC recommends removing any electronic devices, including TVs and smartphones from the bedroom.
- Consider dark shades for windows to reduce light in your room.
- Use earplugs, a fan, or a noise machine to reduce distracting noises that may keep you awake.
- Practice relaxing activities before bed such as drinking herbal tea or taking a bath. If you can't sleep, engage in some of these activities in dim light.
- Increase physical activity during the day, but not too close to bedtime.
- Try not to nap during the day. If you need to, avoid napping after 5 PM.
- Drink enough fluid at night to keep from waking up thirsty, but not so much that you will wake up and have to go to the bathroom.

Section I:

Lifestyle Changes

Time Outdoors

Exposure to green spaces has been associated with a wide range of health benefits, including lower stress, better mood, a reduced risk for mental health challenges, improved sleep, increased positive social interactions, an increased sense of meaning, and improved impulse inhibition. Even exposure to images and sounds of nature while indoors has been shown to have beneficial psychological effects.

Ongoing research aims to determine exactly what benefits different levels of exposure to various natural settings, including blue spaces with water, may have for different people. One study found that people reported greater feelings of restoration and connection to nature after spending time in rural locations than they did after spending time in urban green spaces. In terms of the duration of one's commune with nature, another study found that people who spent two recreational hours in nature during the previous week, reported significantly greater health and well-being relative to those who did not.

Regardless of what the optimal exposure to nature is, take advantage of any natural environments that may be close to where you live and work. Time spent in urban parks can still lead to improvements in well-being and mental health.

TIP  **Aim to spend at least 2 hours per week in a natural environment. This time can be spread out across multiple outings or be reached in a single outing.**

Section I:

Lifestyle Changes

Connection to Community

Leaning on a network of social support has been associated with many benefits, including the ability to cope with stress, alleviating emotional distress, promoting good mental health, and encouraging adherence to a treatment plan. Positive social communication with family and friends has also been shown to reduce anxiety and increase feelings of security.

If calling up old friends or checking in with family is not a good fit for your recovery process, there are other options to bolster your social network:

- **Volunteer** for a cause you care about to meet others with similar interests and a shared purpose.
- **Join a gym or workout group** to increase your physical activity while expanding your social network.
- **Take a class** at a local community center or college. Subjects can range from cooking and creating art to learning about graphic design and anthropology. Explore what's available near you!
- **Go online** to find support groups and forums dedicated to your identity, interests, and hobbies.
 - The National Alliance on Mental Illness also has local chapters all over the country that can help connect you with mental health resources in your area, including peer support groups for those with brain health conditions as well as caregivers.

Section I:

Lifestyle Changes

Purposeful Hobbies

Research suggests that engaging in hobbies like playing guitar, gardening, or creative writing can offer mental health benefits. For example, one longitudinal study found that taking up a hobby was associated with a decrease in depressive symptoms and 30% lower odds of experiencing depression. Such activities can induce a “flow” state of intense but effortless attention that can be both joyful and healing. Factors behind such benefits could include the novelty, stimulation, self-expression, and sense of growth and accomplishment that hobbies can provide. Many hobbies can also include an element of social support and belonging to a community, which in and of itself has been linked to mental health benefits.



Section 2:

Therapy

Psychotherapy, also known as Talk Therapy or Counseling, is a way to help individuals with a broad range of brain health conditions. It provides an opportunity to explore thoughts, feelings, and patterns of behavior. Psychotherapy can also help individuals learn new coping skills and techniques to better manage daily stressors and symptoms associated with a mental health condition. In fact, according to the American Psychological Association, about 75% of people who participate in talk therapy experience some benefit. There are many types of Psychotherapy, each with its own approach. The type of Psychotherapy that's right for you depends on your individual situation.

Psychoanalysis and Psychodynamic Therapies

This approach focuses on changing problematic behaviors, feelings, and thoughts by discovering their unconscious meanings and motivations. Psychoanalytically-oriented therapies are characterized by a close working partnership between the therapist and patient. Patients learn about themselves by exploring their interactions in the therapeutic relationship.

Cognitive Therapy

Cognitive therapy emphasizes what people think rather than what they do. Cognitive therapists believe that dysfunctional thinking leads to dysfunctional emotions or behaviors. By changing their thoughts, people can change how they feel and what they do.

Behavioral Therapy

This approach focuses on learning's role in developing both normal and abnormal behaviors. Behavioral Therapy aims to identify and change unhealthy behaviors.

Section 2:

Therapy

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

CBT therapists use a combination of cognitive and behavioral therapy to help individuals develop coping skills that will change problematic or unhealthy ways, thought patterns, emotions, and behaviors. A certain amount of information about an individual's history is needed, but the focus is primarily on addressing current challenges and moving forward. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has proven to be effective for a range of mental health conditions.

Humanistic Therapy

This approach emphasizes people's capacity to make rational choices and meet their maximum potential. Concern and respect for others are also important themes.

Integrative Therapy

Many therapists don't tie themselves to a single approach. Instead, they blend elements from different approaches and tailor their treatment to each client's needs.

Teletherapy

For some individuals, traditional in-person therapy may not be an option. Teletherapy has become increasingly common, especially throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and can be beneficial because it can provide flexibility, potential cost savings and extend access to care.

Section 2:

Therapy

TIP  **Finding the right relationship may take more than one try.**

- Just because a therapist or psychiatrist fits the bill on paper doesn't mean that the relationship will be a good fit once you connect for a session. If you don't feel comfortable with the first provider or two that you find, don't give up on the process.

TIP  **Ask questions upfront before seeing a therapist.**

- You may want to know more about a provider's treatment approach, fees, typical hours, or first available appointment. Asking questions will help ensure you are not surprised when you see your provider for the first time.

TIP  **Be open and honest.**

- Achieving success in therapy will depend on the willingness to share your thoughts, feelings, and experiences and being open to considering new insights, ideas, and ways of doing things. If you're reluctant to talk about certain issues because of painful emotions, embarrassment, or a fear of how your therapist will react, be vocal and let them know.
- Access to therapy can often be a barrier for individuals seeking help or treatment. Although many people use their insurance provider to seek treatment, others don't have access to insurance and may need help finding low-cost resources. A great resource is the [One Mind PsyberGuide](#), which includes app reviews and digital health resources. Another is the non-profit organization [Open Path Psychotherapy Collective](#), which matches those who cannot afford therapy with affordable mental health services.

Section 3:

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not be overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us. There are various ways to practice and benefit from mindfulness.

Meditation

Researchers theorize that mindfulness meditation promotes metacognitive awareness, increases focus, reduces stress, decreases rumination, and enhances one's attentional capacity. These cognitive gains contribute to effective emotion regulation.

Some common meditation practices include:

- **Mindfulness Meditation.** This practice helps to focus without reactivity on thoughts and images as they appear. You focus on an awareness of the present moment. You start with a single central point, such as your breath, then expand to include thoughts, emotions, and sensations.
- **Moving Meditation.** Adding an extra 20 to 30 minutes of meditation into a busy schedule may be difficult. Another option is to try a form of exercise that combines fitness with meditation, such as walking meditation and Tai Chi.



Section 3:

Mindfulness

Yoga

Yoga, an ancient practice and meditation, has become increasingly popular in today's ever-changing society. Some of the many benefits of yoga include, but are not limited to, stress management, pain relief, increased blood flow, and improved breathing. While there are various types of yoga, whichever practice you choose, can be very beneficial to many individuals both with and without a mental health condition.

Some common yoga practices include:

- **Hatha Yoga.** This form of yoga emphasizes strengthening and purifying the body and involves physical postures and breathing techniques.
- **Lyengar Yoga.** This style of yoga focuses on alignment. It is fluid and dancelike and uses props like wooden blocks, straps, chairs, bolsters, and blankets to help you achieve and hold postures.
- **Ashtanga Yoga.** This is also known as ashtanga vinyasa or power yoga. It's intense and fast-paced and designed to build your endurance and strength.
- **Bikram Yoga.** This type of yoga is practiced in a hot room, unlike many other types of yoga. It involves a set of 26 postures practiced twice per session.
- **Restorative Yoga.** This yoga practice does not use active postures and focuses instead on relaxation.
- **Kripalu Yoga.** This is a slower-moving style of yoga with an intensity level between restorative yoga and the more vigorous forms.

Although these are some of the common ways to practice mindfulness, there are additional resources that can help you discover other mindfulness strategies. A great resource is [One Mind PsyberGuide](#), which rates apps and digital health resources, including mindfulness and meditation apps.

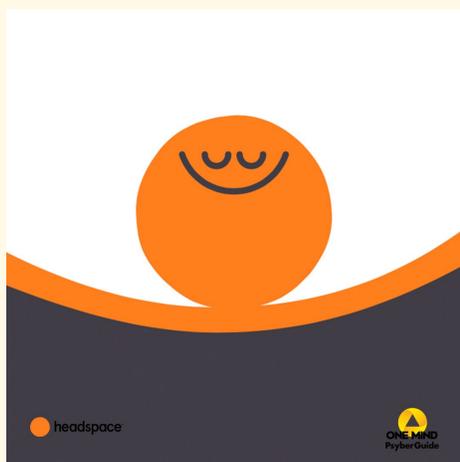
Section 4:

Digital Therapies

There is a wide range of apps that can provide support for someone looking to manage or improve their mental health. While apps are not a suitable replacement for a professional mental health care provider, they can help you learn more about mental health, support overall wellness, and supplement a treatment plan.

TIP  **Not all digital health apps are made equally.**

- One Mind PsyberGuide rates apps and digital health resources based on their credibility, transparency, and user experience.
- Check out the Resources section of our website for a selection of apps that have been curated based on the types of challenges and mental health conditions that they seek to address, courtesy of One Mind PsyberGuide.



Section 5:

Brain Training

Brain training is an approach to improving mental focus, mood regulation, and quality of life that harnesses a property of the brain called **neuroplasticity**. This term refers to how the brain can be described as “plastic.” Each of the brain’s cell networks is involved in numerous activities like daydreaming or planning dinner. Neuroplasticity is the brain’s ability to reform and strengthen its neural networks with sustained experience in a given activity. This process works a bit like bodybuilding; the more you “exercise” a neural network, the stronger the intensity of the signals that travel on it, and the easier its mental activities become.

Targeted brain training of specific neural networks that are impaired in conditions like depression or schizophrenia can harness neuroplasticity to help people enhance their well-being in a range of ways. This method shows great promise to help patients across the psychiatric spectrum.

Platforms and Apps

[One Mind PsyberGuide](#) is a great resource to find brain training technology that you can access and use through apps on your phone. Filter their [app guide](#) by “Cognitive Training” to find the right platform for you.

[BrainHQ](#), an online platform offering a brain training program designed by an international team of neuroscientists led by Dr. Michael Merzenich, is another option. Each level takes less than five minutes, so you can determine what pace works best for you. Pricing ranges from \$8 - 14 per month.

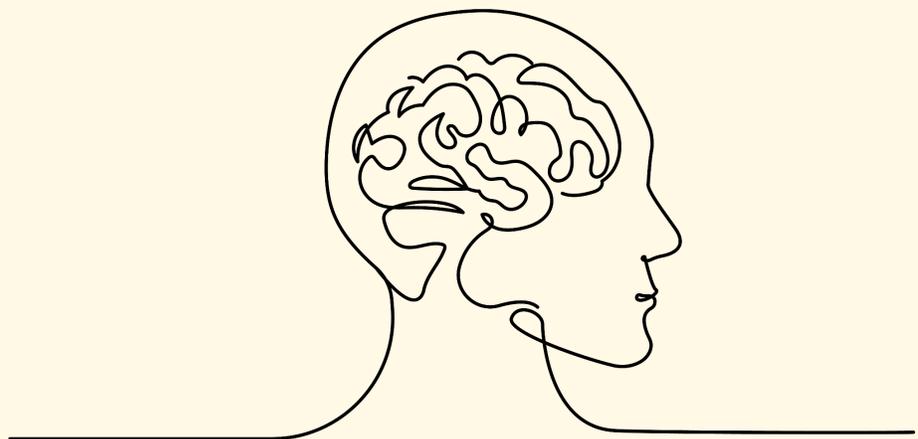
Section 6:

Neurostimulation

Neurostimulation is a neuroplasticity-based approach that can be beneficial for patients with more severe impairments. Our brain's neural networks are constantly processing oscillating electrical currents in varying rhythms (i.e. "brain waves"). For one part of the brain to communicate properly with another, the two regions must be in sync. In neurostimulation, a device delivers electrical or magnetic stimulation to the brain until those regions adapt to a new electrical rhythm. This process enables the brain to "learn" healthier internal connectivity, improving patients' mental and emotional health.

Although a form of neurostimulation has already been FDA-approved to treat depression, scientists, such as One Mind Rising Star [Dr. Vikaas Sohal M.D., Ph.D.](#), are exploring how it can improve cognition as well.

TIP  **To further explore neurostimulation as a part of a treatment plan, contact a mental health professional to learn more about options near you.**



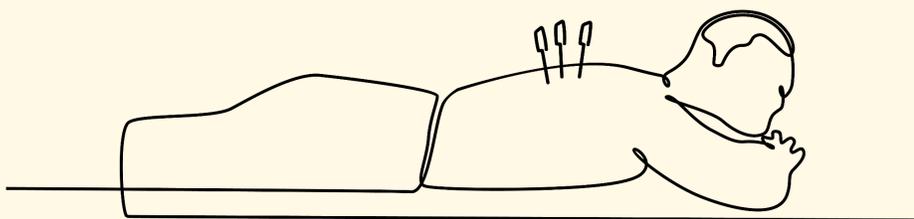
Section 7:

Acupuncture

Acupuncture has been used to treat many medical conditions for thousands of years in traditional Chinese medicine. In this practice, thin steel needles are inserted into specific points of the body, called meridians, to achieve targeted health-related outcomes.

Acupuncture may be a viable treatment for some brain health conditions, although in most cases, there is still insufficient evidence to recommend its use. Acupuncture for the treatment of depression has been evaluated in the largest number of studies, and positive outcomes were observed, especially when this strategy was used in conjunction with medication vs. using medication alone. Encouraging results have also been observed for the use of acupuncture to treat schizophrenia and anxiety disorders.

If you are interested in trying acupuncture, find a certified acupuncturist to learn more. Your doctor may be able to recommend a practitioner. You can also check the registry of the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine to find a professional in your area.



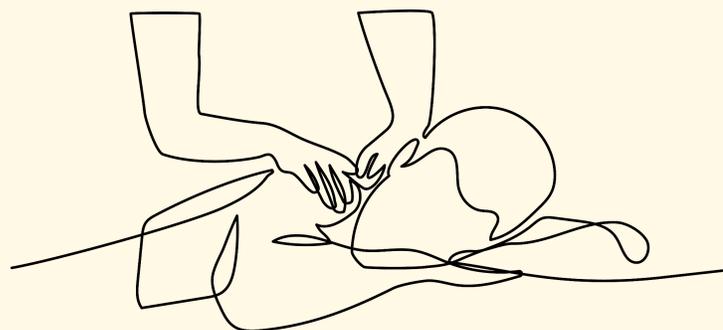
Section 8:

Massage Therapy

Massage therapy is a holistic treatment approach that can be a helpful part of a comprehensive treatment plan. The biology of massage and the impact that it can have on health and well-being is a nascent but growing area of research that requires more rigorous examination. One study reported that an aromatherapy massage intervention was associated with an increase in psychological well-being and a reduction in cortisol levels when compared to the group of participants that did not receive treatment. Other results suggest that massage may decrease inflammation and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal activation, which mediates the major components of the body's stress response. Massage may also stimulate specific brain circuits that are involved in pleasure and reward.

In terms of this practice's effect on psychiatric conditions, some results suggest that twice-weekly massage therapy can be effective in decreasing depressive symptoms. A growing body of evidence suggests that massage can reduce anxiety symptoms as a standalone or supplemental therapy.

While more research is needed to better understand massage as an intervention for mental health conditions and this practice is not a substitute for medical care, it can be a helpful tool in a holistic treatment plan.



Section 9:

Complementary and Alternative Medicines

Herbal remedies, also known as complementary and alternative medicines (CAMs), have been used for centuries as tools to support health and well-being in many cultures. They are increasingly used as relatively safe and low-cost methods to improve well-being. However, virtually all of them need to be further researched to establish both their efficacy and safety. The FDA considers herbal supplements to be food, and thus they are not subjected to the same regulations as medication.

TIP  **If you're interested in using any herbal medicines, you should consult both your doctor and a licensed herbalist.**

- You can also look for a registered herbalist through the American Herbalist Guild (AHG).

There is evidence to support the use of herbal medicines for the treatment of psychiatric disorders, especially in the case of St John's wort to treat depression. In some randomized studies with depressed samples, St John's wort (SJW) performed comparably to SSRIs fluoxetine and sertraline. A systematic review of the literature on St John's wort yielded results that showed heterogeneity but overall suggested its superiority in efficacy to placebo and equivalence to standard antidepressants, with better tolerability. SJW contains more than 150 chemicals, not all of which are well understood. More large-scale, controlled trials are needed to understand the efficacy, neurobiological underpinnings, and safety of St John's wort.

Section 9:

Complementary and Alternative Medicines

The following interventions have potential for use to help treat specific conditions, but require more research to establish clinical evidence:

Depression

- Hypericum perforatum L. (St John's Wort)
- Rhodiola rosea (roseroot)
- Crocus sativus (saffron)

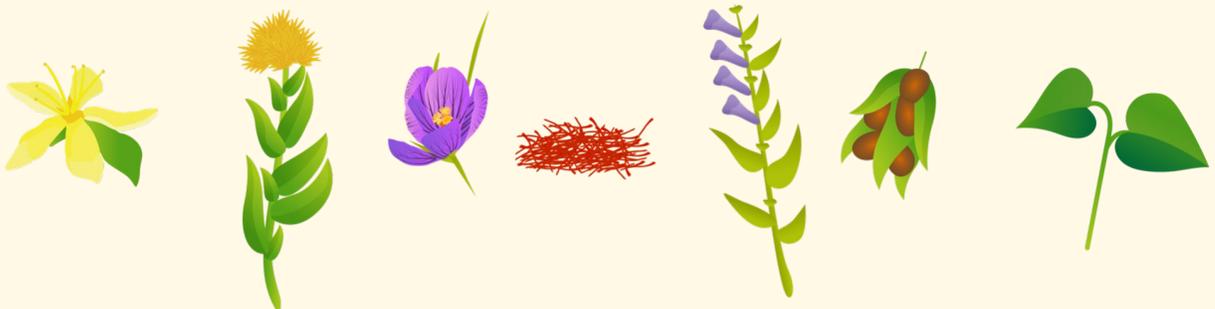
Anxiety disorders

- Passiflora incarnata (passionflower)
- Scutellaria lateriflora (scullcap)
- Zizyphus jujuba (sour date)

Phobic, panic and obsessive-compulsive disorders

- Piper methysticum (kava)

TIP  **Learn more about Complementary and Alternative Medicine from [Mental Health America](#).**



Quick Resource Guide

Digital health resources

DIGITAL HEALTH RESOURCES

One Mind PsyberGuide

- Evidence-based ratings of apps and digital health tools to support mental health

FREE 24/7 CRISIS SUPPORT RESOURCES

Crisis Text Line

- Text “HELLO” to 741-741

National Suicide Prevention Chat

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

- 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- En español: 1-888-628-9454

YOUTH SUPPORT

Teen Line

- Peer Support Hotline open from 6 PM - 10 PM PST
- 800-TLC-TEEN

Strong 365 Peer Support Chat

- For youth experiencing psychosis
- Free, 24/7
- Code: STRONG

Quick Resource Guide

Digital health resources

LGBTQ+ SUPPORT

The Trevor Project

- Chat, Text, and Talk support available

INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

Find emergency numbers, suicide hotlines, and online chats organized by country through Suicide Stop.

Find One Mind online through our website or social media.



