

VITAMIN Jay

Don't Worry, Buy Happy



Jayson Kroner, CSN

Have you ever noticed that your worst days seem to come crashing in with all the speed and fury of a burning 747, only to linger in much the same way that body odor might be in a small room? For many, it takes next to nothing to set off a series of neurological dominos that quickly spawn a mind full of thoughts that are mean and bitter and resentful. And as if that wasn't bad enough, a good mood can turn on you fast, by something as simple as a driver who never learned what a turn signal was, or some fool at the department store with a cart full of tag-less items in the express lane.

The rebound, however, does not always come with such swift accord. Once triggered by stimuli that cause stress or interferes with our very important personal agendas, the human mind takes a course of action that has been written in DNA since the dawn of free thought. In order to understand this concept, you have to keep something in mind. The brain and neural structures that regulate mood and emotion could care less about your excuse. They will not empathize at the fact that you are already 45 minutes late to a time-sensitive social engagement. They will not pity you for falling asleep on your remote control the night before a big job interview, and don't care that the words VOL and CHAN now fossilize your 9:00 A.M. face. No. The troubled mind and its band of merry nerves only know one thing: where the f@&# are my neurotransmitters?

Understanding Neurotransmitters

Science has taught us volumes about human mood. One of the most interesting aspects is that our emotional perception of the world around us, be it good or bad, is at the absolute mercy of its specific chemical composition. As our overmedicated, over stimulated population continues to grow increasingly stressed, words like serotonin and dopamine become frighteningly household in nature. Still, very few people seem to have a genuine understanding of what these familiar sounding chemicals actually are, what they do, and why we're doomed when they start slacking off.

Sitting at the throne of the brain's hierarchy of chemical command is Serotonin. Also known as 5-hydroxytryptamine or 5-HT, this king of neurotransmitters is produced by the pineal gland as a defense mechanism needed to counter anger, fear, depression, anxiety, etc. It regulates mood and emotion by transporting electrical impulses from the brain to the central nervous system. Depression, manic and bipolar disorders, insomnia, anxiety, and other neurological challenges have been linked to an imbalance in the brain's supply and use of serotonin. In fact, some of the most landmark studies suggest that serotonin imbalances serve as the foundation for a long list of common mood abnormalities. This makes sense, especially when you consider that abnormally low serotonin levels have been linked

to serial killing, suicide, and hate crimes.

Another important factor in mood is dopamine, a chemical neurotransmitter and hormone that is produced at several regions of the brain. Discovered in 1952, dopamine is involved in many of the most important mental and cognitive functions, including several that govern personality and day-to-day behavioral patterns. Among its most noteworthy roles, dopamine has a strong influence on reward, pleasure, motivation, sleep, learning, memory, problem solving, and motor skills. While serotonin is closely associated with perception, dopamine is unquestionably the "desire" neurotransmitter. Low levels of dopamine have been linked to more severe neural conditions, such as sexual aggression, delusion and paranoia, multiple personality, and schizophrenia.

It becomes easy to understand how delicate the human mood is, and moreover, how dependent our sanity is on the balance of chemical influence. Pathetically, a growing percentage of our population has been reduced to the level of human Pez dispensers; hooked on powerful pills, constantly on edge, and drowning in the quicksand of emotional debt. But there are a lot of problems with mood inhibitors and other "happy pills" that your doctor has not, and may never tell you about. Let's use serotonin uptake inhibitors as an example.

First, these medications are extremely addictive. Drugs that act on serotonin receptors trick the body into thinking that the brain has everything under control, when in fact, it is absolutely out of control. SSRI's are strong chemicals that trigger a massive release of serotonin. Almost immediately, serotonin receptor sites are literally flooded with neurotransmitters, resulting in "happiness high" that the body becomes very accustomed to. As time goes on, however, a tolerance builds and the body becomes unable to manufacture the amount of serotonin needed to match the same levels of pleasure experienced upon first taking the drug. So, like any excessive and dedicated American, we up the dose – sometimes doubling, tripling, or quadrupling it. Not only is this incredibly dangerous, it eventually fries out the nerve cells. Once the damage is done, you end up with is a brain that will no longer produce serotonin on its own, a drug that can't make enough to keep us happy, and surrounding nerve cells that just can't take it any more. Of course, they don't tell you this in the commercials.

The cycle may begin innocently enough, but all too often ends up in the most ugly, addicted, depressed fashion possible. In many cases, users switch drugs until the scenario recreates itself. And this is happening right now, at a pace that can barely be managed on paper. Much of this can be attributed to black market addiction, not to mention teens who steal mom and dad's little helpers from the medicine cabinet.

Alternative Measures

This has a lot of experts scratching their heads. Why now? Why us? How did we let things get so chemically out of control? Granted, that is a completely separate discussion, there is one element worth mentioning at this juncture. In our quest to wear permanent smiles, we seem to have forgotten that, like every major system of the body, the brain's neurological components are dependent on a number of factors; nutrition is no exception. Any way you choose to look at it, today's modern diet sucks. Twenty-five years ago, we were not eating fast and processed foods on a record setting level. Meats and milks and grains were not rife with growth hormones and pesticides. On an unrelated topic, we were not visually addicted to a high definition machine in our living room that filled our heads with the false hope and vague rewards of product consumption.

The saturation of mood altering drugs has resulted in lots o' research, much of which suggests that diet may have more to do with mood than previously thought. The brain is one of the most major of the major organs. It has needs, and if these needs are not met, it does not do its job right—period. There is now evidence that some natural products may be highly beneficial in supporting the production and activity of neurotransmitters, and therefore a healthy mood.

Essential Fatty Acids

The human brain is not the solid, perfectly sculpted object that is so frequently portrayed on television. Actually, it's an eight pound mushy ball of fat that is made up of approximately 80% phospholipids. This has led many researchers to believe that certain fat might hold the answer to mood disorders. A now famous 1999 Harvard study was among the first to successfully determine the link. Dr. Andrew Stoll evaluated the effect that 9.6 grams/day of fish oil had on bipolar individuals, experiencing recent remission. At the conclusion of the 16 week study, Stoll and his staff were amazed to find that nearly all participants reported marked improvement in symptoms.

GABA (Gamma Amino Butyric Acid) is produced naturally by the brain, and used to inhibit the overstimulation of nerve impulses. Uncontained, excessive nerve impulses have been shown to induce stress, irritability, and sleep deprivation. GABA is appropriately dubbed the brain's "natural calming agent." It assists nerve cells in properly communicating with each other, and helps regulate many facets of mood and emotion. These characteristics make it possible for GABA to help ease nervous tensions naturally. Many users have found that GABA is best utilized when taken before bed. Unlike OTC and prescription sleep aids, GABA does not cause drowsiness. Instead, it prevents neurotransmitters from over-firing, thus making it possible for the body to drift off naturally.

Valerian Tossing, turning, and

long sleepless nights are some of the most common physical byproducts of an unhealthy mood. As the mind continues to work out its problems, over-stimulated nerves prevent the release of chemicals that allow the body to fall asleep. Valerian is a 100% natural, non-addictive herbal extract that inhibits these nerve impulses, thus allowing the body to attain pure, uninterrupted slumber. It has been used safely for centuries, and is considered one of the most popular natural, non-OTC ways to relax and obtain healthy, adequate sleep.

Kava is a natural sedative herb that has been shown to promote a natural state of relaxation. Within the plant's thick roots are high concentrations of kavalactones that initiate a calming effect on the body's limbic system. The limbic system is housed in the frontal cortex of the brain, and plays a major role in mood, arousal, emotion, and memory. Taken as recommended, Kava appears to be very safe. Individuals with compromised liver health should consult their health professional prior to using Kava.

St. John's Wort is extracted from a perennial herb that blooms during the summer months from June to September. Studies have shown that St. John's Wort contains compounds that help balance mood, promote feelings of calmness, and encourage healthy sleeping patterns. It has been suggested that Hypericin, the plant's main active compound, is responsible for its ability to increase serotonin production. Many loyal users find it beneficial in providing the balance needed to maintain a positive mood naturally, without harsh side effects.

I want to be very clear about something. I'm not going to sit here and downplay the role that medicine has in human health. I have seen first hand how, when used responsibly, some medicines can offer great improvement in a person's health. Unfortunately, too many people are exploiting the commercial availability of designer drugs as an excuse to live reckless lifestyles. This is not the goal. Eat a healthy diet rich in fresh, organic foods. Exercise regularly. Do things that provide you with a sense of self reward. Become addicted to laughter. Learn the most complex lessons from the most simple gestures of your children. Most importantly, find a non-synthetic reason to smile - it can go a long way.

Jayson Kroner is an IFA Certified Sports Nutritionist, Co-Author of the book, 7-Syndrome Healing: Supplement Essentials for Body and Mind, a Consultant to some of the Natural Product Industry's most well-respected manufacturers and an accomplished health and fitness journalist. His work has appeared in dozens of national health, fitness and training magazines, in addition to such notable dailies as the, Chicago Tribune, Chicago Sun Times, Daily Herald and Boston Globe. Contact Jayson at: jaysonkroner@yahoo.com. -CWM