



For better
mental health

Making sense of homeopathy



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Making sense of homeopathy

This booklet is an introduction to homeopathic medicine, and describes how homeopathy can help people who have mental health needs. It offers practical advice about getting treatment, but is not intended as a guide to individual remedies.

What is homeopathy?

Homeopathy is a safe, effective system of medicine that uses very diluted natural ingredients to help the body to heal itself and to build up its resistance to illness. It's been used successfully, worldwide, for about two hundred years.

Homeopathy is a 'holistic' system of medicine. It views good health as a natural balance of both the physical and mental sides of you as a whole person. It recognises that symptoms of ill health are expressions of inner disharmony, and that it is the patient who needs treatment and not the disease. The remedies therefore tackle the cause of someone's illness, rather than merely preventing or reducing the symptoms. For this reason, the remedies need to be tailored to the individual to be effective, and this means that buying them over-the-counter, without consulting a qualified practitioner, may be a waste of time and money.

How do the remedies work?

Homeopathy is based on the principle of 'like cures like'; that substances that cause symptoms in healthy people will cure those symptoms in someone who is not well. The idea behind a homeopathic remedy is that by mimicking the disease it will stimulate the body to correct itself in a way that it hasn't yet managed to do on its own.

As an example, cutting a strong onion can produce stinging, runny eyes, a sore throat and an acrid, runny nose. A homeopath would prescribe the homeopathic remedy made from onion (*Allium cepa*) for a patient who had a cold with these particular symptoms. Conventional medicine (known as allopathic medicine) tries to deal with the chemistry of the symptoms and treats them with something that is their opposite, rather than something that is similar. By doing so, the body still goes on trying to produce the symptoms.

A homeopathic remedy contains only a very tiny amount of active ingredient. To prepare it, a substance is diluted many, many times over, and shaken (or 'succussed') in a particular sequence. An ingredient may be diluted in up to one hundred parts of water or alcohol. This process of dilution may be repeated anywhere from five times up to hundreds of times, or more, depending on the remedy. It's believed that the more dilute the remedy, the more powerful it becomes. The amounts involved are so small that it has led to doubts about whether they can have any effect. Studies with patients have shown that they do, but the evidence is not conclusive. Science can't yet explain how homeopathy works, but there are various theories about how energy behaves at sub-atomic levels that may prove relevant.

Information about remedies comes from the books known as *Materia medica*. The first was compiled through the experiments of Samuel Hahnemann (the German doctor who first established homeopathy) and his successors. They themselves took repeated doses of medicines, while they were healthy, in order to record the symptoms they produced. Through this process, and through the working experience of practitioners, the knowledge about what to use for which conditions has gradually been built up.

Why do people choose homeopathy?

People try homeopathy for all sorts of reasons: because they hear from others that it has worked; because they feel it's natural and believe it's likely to have fewer side effects than conventional medication, or because they prefer its holistic approach. People also like the idea of having more control over their own treatment. Others turn to homeopathy because conventional medicine has let them down, or because they want to relieve the side effects caused by the prescription medicines they need to take.

Many people have used homeopathic remedies, successfully, in one-off situations. Arnica is one of the most well-known remedies, found in many households and used to treat bruising and shock after injury. But homeopathy can also be the best method of treating long-standing complaints, when used as part of a holistic approach to health. This means that the homeopath will look at the person as a whole and work out whether there are underlying medical, emotional or lifestyle factors that may be having some influence on their symptoms.

What happens when people consult a homeopath?

Homeopathy aims to tackle the underlying causes of ill health, as well as to relieve the symptoms that made someone seek help in the first place. The homeopath will want to get a very clear picture of the way that person is feeling and what is contributing to it. Each of us is prone to ill health in a different way. Our constitution (our natural physical and mental make-up), our lifestyle, past experiences, diet, emotional and medical history, present behaviour and current problems will all affect our state of health. The current and past health of family members will also be relevant.

Your first consultation may take between an hour and an hour-and-a-half. The homeopath may ask questions about any and all of these matters, and will be interested in finding out the timing of symptoms that cause trouble, what triggers them, and what feelings come up. The practitioner may also ask about food likes and dislikes, sleeping patterns and what makes you feel nervous or uncomfortable.

He or she will want to hear about all of your symptoms, although they may seem to you to be entirely unconnected. Conventional medicine might treat them separately, but they will all be part and parcel of the same problem and need to be treated in relation to each other.

By building up a detailed picture, the homeopath can prescribe a remedy based on your particular symptoms and the way in which your condition shows itself. A diagnosis such as 'schizophrenia' or 'manic depression (bipolar disorder)', although useful to the practitioner, is only a label that can't reveal the individual condition. It's common for two patients with apparently similar illnesses to be treated with very different remedies.

How do I take the remedy?

Remedies come from natural sources, mostly vegetable or mineral, and often have the same origins as conventional medicines. They usually come in tablet form (although in some cases they are prescribed as a liquid). The soft tablets dissolve rapidly in the mouth; hard tablets may be chewed. Both have a pleasant taste.

The tablets need to be handled as little as possible and it's also best to avoid putting anything in your mouth for 15 minutes before and after taking them. Some homeopaths suggest that coffee, camphor, menthol, peppermint, eucalyptus and other strong-smelling substances should be avoided, because they may interfere with the remedies. (Opinions vary about whether prescription medications may interfere; see p. 10.)

Because they stimulate the body's natural healing powers, remedies can have a long-lasting effect, and you may not have to take them every day. Your practitioner will decide what the dose should be, depending on what's wrong. He or she will take into account any other medication you are taking, as well as any other outside influences that may interfere with the action of the remedy.

What if the remedy doesn't seem to be working?

Patients often experience a sense of wellbeing after taking a remedy, but sometimes it can be hard to tell whether the treatment is working. To begin with, it may be a question of feeling more able to cope with things in general, rather than noticing a particular improvement in the condition you are seeking help for.

Occasionally, symptoms may appear slightly worse for a short time. This is generally a good sign, showing that the remedy is taking effect. Sometimes a cold, a rash or a discharge may appear, as the system goes through a 'cleansing phase'. Discuss with the practitioner any symptoms that appear after taking a remedy.

Follow-up interviews will generally take place at monthly intervals. Practitioners do their best to choose the most suitable remedy at a first consultation, but it can take time to arrive at a proper understanding of the case, and you may need to be patient until the full picture has emerged. How long the treatment takes will vary according to the complaint, but usually the longer you've had the problem, the more time is needed to treat it.

What if I'm taking other medication?

Homeopathic remedies are able to work well alongside most other medicines, because they are so highly diluted that they won't chemically interact with other drugs. However, if you have been prescribed any medication by your GP, psychiatrist or other health-care professional, it's very important that you don't stop your treatment without first talking this over with them. Any health-care professional involved in your treatment should be told about your intention to ask for homeopathic help. Your homeopathic practitioner should be happy to arrange this for you.

Side effects caused by medication can be very distressing. These can include symptoms such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, nausea, weight gain, loss of energy, headaches, sweating, and involuntary movements. Homeopathic remedies chosen to combat symptoms encourage the body to put right these effects. Continue taking the remedy on a regular basis for as long as you are on the medication.

What about side effects?

Because of the dilution process that is part of their preparation, homeopathic remedies should be free from side effects. They are also non-habit-forming. However, if someone takes a particular remedy, consistently, over a period of time, when it's not indicated, they could begin to experience symptoms of that remedy. For example, *Coffea*, which is a remedy made from the coffee bean, is useful for treating insomnia accompanied by nervousness, restlessness, and over-sensitivity. However, if this remedy is taken for any length of time without these symptoms being present, you may notice them beginning to emerge. Once you stop, the symptoms should quickly disappear. This highlights the importance of getting advice from a professional before taking a remedy.

How should I go about getting treatment?

Homeopathic remedies should only be taken after consultation with a suitably qualified practitioner. It's always helpful if you can go to someone who has been recommended to you. In any case, you should check whether the practitioner is a qualified member of a recognised professional organisation, as well as finding out details of their training and experience. Practitioners may work in their own consulting rooms, in natural health clinics and, sometimes, in GP surgeries. The list of *Useful organisations*, on p. 16, provides details of a number of organisations with registers of qualified practitioners.

A first consultation may cost from £40. Further consultations are shorter and will cost less.

There are some GPs or conventional medical doctors who practise homeopathy, and, in theory, all GPs should be able to refer you to one of the homeopathic hospitals. Alternatively, many health insurance schemes are prepared to pay towards complementary medicine.

Some examples of homeopathic treatment

The particular remedies featured here have been chosen to illustrate homeopathic treatment. This does not mean that the remedies prescribed in these cases will help you. Every case should be assessed by a qualified practitioner.

***Arsenicum album* and anxiety**

People who need *Arsenicum album* usually have a range of symptoms that are characterised by anxiety, panic attacks and obsessive behaviour. Physically, they are often extremely lacking in energy. They may feel very restless and are frequently sensitive to cold. Typically, people are worse at night, and insomnia is also a common complaint.

Jane wanted homeopathic treatment because she was having panic attacks. She woke, regularly, in the early hours of the morning with palpitations, feeling sick, covered in perspiration and finding difficulty breathing. She would pace through the house trying to find a place where she could relax, but found herself becoming more and more wound up, until she was convinced she was going insane.

She had always been well organised at home and in her work, able to juggle a home life with two children and a very demanding job. Her home was very orderly, as was her desk at work, but she was finding it increasingly difficult to cope if things were out of place. Her perfectionism drove her to work extremely hard, and she had an intense fear of failure.

When she was asked to take on responsibility for another department, the stress proved to be too much and she felt that she was losing control.

This pressure instigated the panic attacks and anxiety, which in turn led to a gradual yet steady decline in her health. She had sought help from a variety of health professionals.

Jane was prescribed *Arsenicum album* because of the symptoms of anxiety, and her need to keep everything under control. One month later, she reported that she was sleeping much better and felt much calmer in herself. Once her course of treatment was completed, she felt able to start addressing some of the problems she was experiencing at work, as well as letting go of some of the expectations she had been holding on to.

***Veratrum album* and schizophrenia**

Veratrum album is for depression, loss of self-confidence and brooding. The remedy is often used for people who have been given a diagnosis of schizophrenia or manic depression.

Mark and his wife ran a successful business together. Mark's uncle had suffered from schizophrenia, since his early twenties, and Mark's father had been through bouts of depression at stressful points in his life. Mark, however, had always been very healthy, confident, and successful. He sought homeopathic treatment following a complete nervous and mental breakdown.

His wife had left him suddenly, and Mark was left with serious debts to pay off, which meant he was forced to move into cheap lodgings. The shock was immense, and he found it very hard to accept the change to his accustomed lifestyle. He became preoccupied with religious thoughts, which gradually dominated his life. He believed he was hearing voices from God telling him how to save the world. Eventually, a diagnosis of schizophrenia was made.

During his first homeopathic consultation, Mark described an intense sensation of coldness throughout his body. He felt as if ice-cold water was running through his veins, rather than blood. He also developed a strong craving for sour food and, in particular, for lemons or similar fruit. These symptoms helped the practitioner to arrive at a suitable prescription of *Veratrum album*.

Mark used the homeopathy alongside the psychiatric help he was receiving. Together with the medication and counselling, it enabled him to tackle his problems and make good progress.

***Aurum metallicum* and depression**

This remedy is used to treat deep depressive and suicidal states, accompanied by feelings of isolation and despair. It tends to suit high-achievers. Things can fall apart for such people when these goals are frustrated in some way. Individuals needing this remedy tend to be very idealistic and can be devastated by disappointment in love. They may also have strong religious convictions.

Paul had worked for a large company for some time. His hard work had quickly resulted in his rise to management. When a hoped-for promotion went to a relative newcomer, Paul began to experience intense feelings of worthlessness and depression.

During his first homeopathic consultation, he admitted that he had felt depressed, in some way, all his life, as if there had always been a dark cloud over him. As a child, it seemed to him that his parents would withdraw their love if he didn't meet their expectations. He had always tried to do his best to avoid rejection. He had learned from an early age to be independent and not to show any weaknesses. Following a prescription of *Aurum metallicum*, Paul reported feeling much better in himself, as if some lightness had finally entered his life.

***Natrium muriaticum* and *Ignatia* for depression and anxiety**

The National Homeopathic Service (see p. 17), are running studies on treatments for mental health problems. These are highlighting the importance of grief and sadness as major triggers of depression and anxiety, along with feelings of abandonment. *Natrium muriaticum* (salt) and *Ignatia* are proving to be the remedies most prescribed for this, at present, although no case material is currently available.

The key characteristics a homeopath might look for in prescribing *Natrium muriaticum* include: emotional vulnerability; sensitivity to music; avoidance of any risk of being hurt; a tendency to dwell too much on the past, and ailments connected to feelings of grief.

Before prescribing *Ignatia*, a homeopath might look for key signs including: emotional sensitivity; a habit of sighing; conflicts between feelings and reality; a strong desire, especially in women, to prove themselves, which might express itself in political activity, such as feminism.

References

- Clinical trials of homeopathy* (1991) J. Kleijnen, P. Knipschild, G. ter Riet (*British medical journal* 302, 316-323)
- The concordant materia medica* F. van Vermeulen (Merlijn Publishers)
- The organon of medicine* (6th ed.) S. Hahnemann (B. Jain)
- Repertorium homeopathicum syntheticum* ed. Dr F. Schroyens (Homeopathic Book Publishers)
- Thatak's materia medica* Dr S. R. Thatak (Foxlee-Vaughan Publishing Ltd)

Useful organisations

Mind

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: www.mind.org.uk or MindinfoLine on 0845 766 0163.

British Homeopathic Association

Hahnemann House, 29 Park Street West, Luton LU1 3BE

tel. 0870 444 3950

fax: 0870 444 3960

email: info@trusthomeopathy.org

web: www.trusthomeopathy.org

Publishes a register of practitioners who are healthcare professionals

The Homeopathic Medical Association

6 Livingstone Road, Gravesend, Kent DA12 5DZ

tel. 01474 560 336

fax: 01474 327 431

email: info@the-hma.org

web: www.the-hma.org

Publishes a register of practitioners

The National Homeopathic Service

127a Fortess Road, London NW5 2HR

tel. 0207 284 0954

A registered charity promoting access to complementary medicines among disadvantaged groups in the community

The Royal London Homeopathic Hospital

Greenwell Street, London W1W 5BP

tel. 020 7391 8833

fax: 020 7391 8865

patient services: 020 7391 8888

web: www.uclh.org/about/rlhh.shtml

The leading centre for complementary medicine in the NHS

The Society of Homeopaths

11 Brookfield, Duncan Close, Moulton Park

Northampton NN3 6WL

tel. 0845 450 6611

fax: 0845 450 6622

email: info@homeopathy-soh.org

web: www.homeopathy-soh.org

Publishes a register of practitioners

Useful websites

web: www.helios.co.uk

For mail order remedies

web: www.ainsworths.com

For mail order remedies

web: www.weleda.co.uk

For mail order remedies

Further reading and order form

- Healing minds* J. Wallcraft (Mental Health Foundation 1998) £12
- How to cope with panic attacks* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to cope with sleep problems* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to improve your mental wellbeing* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to increase your self-esteem* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to stop worrying* (Mind 2004) £1
- Learn to sleep well* (DBP 2000) £9.99
- Making sense of antidepressants* (Mind 2004) £3.50
- Making sense of antipsychotics (major tranquillisers)* (Mind 2004) £3.50
- Making sense of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)* (Mind 2004) £3.50
- Making sense of counselling* (Mind 2004) £3.50
- Making sense of herbal remedies* (Mind 2004) £3.50
- Making sense of minor tranquillisers* (Mind 2003) £3.50
- Making sense of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis* (Mind 2004) £3.50
- Making sense of sleeping pills* (Mind 2004) £3.50
- The Mind guide to food and mood* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to massage* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to physical activity* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to spiritual practices* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to yoga* (Mind 2004) £1
- Relaxation: exercises and inspirations for wellbeing*
Dr S. Brewer (DBP 2003) £4.99
- Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding depression* (Mind 2004) £1
- Understanding manic depression (bipolar disorder)* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding mental illness* (Mind 2004) £1

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This booklet was written by Toni Douglas-Gooden, Susan Salmon and Inez Claus
First published by Mind 2001. Revised edition © Mind 2004

ISBN 1 903567-15-7

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Mind (National Association for Mental Health)
15-19 Broadway
London E15 4BQ
tel: 020 8519 2122
fax: 020 8522 1725
web: www.mind.org.uk



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