



An Herbal Approach to Anxiety Relief

By Dr. Alisa Cooper, D.C., C.C.N.

It is exciting to be living in our society today! Everything is moving fast, and there's so much to stimulate our senses. But as the pace of society speeds up, so does the pulse of its members. Literally! Our hearts are beating faster than ever before, we are taking shallow breaths, and our cells are struggling and straining for adequate oxygen. We are shoveling packaged, processed and micro-waved foods into our stomachs and the energy needed to digest that sludge of sewage is being diverted away from our intestines and shunted to our muscles so we can *fight or flee from perceived threats to our existence*.

What are these threats? They are whatever you tell yourself you don't want to deal with! Bills, health issues, troubled relationships, responsibilities... whatever! And when we are confronted with these threats, whether real or perceived, we experience anxiety. A little anxiety here, and a little anxiety there- here, there, everywhere- and before you know it, you are dealing with the likes of generalized anxiety, fears, phobias, and even depression.

A Constant State of Arousal

In essence, our **sympathetic nervous systems** are dominating the playing field, and we were just not designed that way. We were designed to have balance between our sympathetic and **parasympathetic** nervous systems. Our parasympathetic nervous system is that part of the **autonomic nervous system** (meaning not under *conscious* control) that keeps us calm, slows our heart, deepens our breathing, and shunts blood to the gut for digestion. The **sympathetic** nervous system, on the other hand, prepares us to run from our enemies or stay and do battle. It speeds up the heart, allows us to breathe faster, expands our peripheral vision (you do need to see your enemy coming at you!), and shunts blood to the muscles for an increased burst of strength.

The “**fight or flight response**” evolved as humans did, and it allowed for our survival as a species. You see, early in our existence on this planet we had very real and dangerous adversaries like enormous bears, wolves and saber-toothed tigers. Being able to go into sympathetic nervous mode gave us the quickness of thought, enhanced vision, increased speed, and super-human strength to overcome threats to our existence. And when the threat had been dealt with, the sympathetic nervous system would recede while the parasympathetic nervous system kicked back on to return the body to a state of balance.

Things are different today! We don't need to go out and hunt for our food, and we generally do not have to be on the lookout for predators. But our lifestyles and personal responses to our perceptions have created a situation where we are in a constant state of **sympathetic arousal**. This is reflected by us feeling **tense, anxious, irritated, agitated, defensive and paranoid**. And after a while (months, years, decades), we often end up feeling weary, exhausted, depressed and even hopelessly resigned.

Kava kava

While prescription medications can often effectively manage anxiety, they are not without side effects, and many people are looking for alternatives. Three of the most effective natural remedies for anxiety are Kava kava, GABA and St. John's wort. **Kava kava (*Piper myristicum*)** is an herbal extract used for centuries in the tropical islands of the South Pacific. It was popular in the US and Europe in the early 1800's as a treatment for **urinary tract infections**, but when antibiotics gained popularity in the early 1900's, kava basically faded from the scene. Only in recent years has it re-emerged, and this time as an effective and well-researched anti-anxiety remedy subjected to double blind, placebo-controlled studies.

Kava makes you feel calm and relaxed. It reduces heart palpitations, chest pain, headaches, dizziness and upset stomach. It is considered appropriate for all types of **non-psychotic** forms of anxiety and/or mild depression and carries no risk of tolerance or addiction. It is famous for its remarkable ability **to reduce anxiety while actually sharpening memory and reaction time**. When you think of kava, think of “**calm alertness.**”

Kava also **relieves muscle spasms and is a pain reliever**, although it operates through non-opiate pathways so it is not habit-forming. For many people, kava is best used on an ‘as-needed’ basis during times of stress and anxiety like when going through a divorce, moving, starting a new job, speaking or performing publicly or going through menopause, quitting smoking, etc.

An effective daily dose of kava in **capsules** is 70-210mg of *kavalactones* at one time, or 50-70mg of *kavalactones* 3x/day. If you are taking the **dried root**, you will need to

ingest 1.5 to 3.0g per day in divided doses. Lastly, if you prefer a **tincture**, take 3-6ml/day in divided doses. If you want to take it to help you sleep, take the full daily dose 30-60 minutes before bed.

Now too much of a good thing can be bad! Or put another way, **more is not necessarily better**. While the toxicity for kava is very low, and it is considered **quite safe at recommended doses**, it can cause dark, dry scaly patches to appear on your palms, soles, back, forearms and shins if you take too much. These will disappear when the remedy is discontinued.

GABA

Another popular natural remedy for anxiety is GABA or **Gamma-aminobutyric acid**. More than an amino acid (protein building block), GABA is the central nervous system's most important **inhibitory neurotransmitter**. That simply means it is a chemical messenger that works in the brain to put the brakes on stimulation and excitement. Excitatory neurotransmitters rev you up and inhibitory neurotransmitters calm you down. They work together as a team to keep you in that delicate state of balance or **homeostasis**.

GABA is effectively being used for **generalized anxiety, panic attacks**, and feelings of **overwhelm** as well as for helping people get off anti-anxiety drugs, which they should do only with the help of their medical practitioner.

If you suffer from an acute anxiety episode, open a 750 mg capsule of GABA and stir it into water and drink. For chronic anxiety, take 750mg 1-3x/day as needed. Always **start with the lowest dose to determine what will be most effective for you**. Like everything else, there is no one single remedy that will work for everyone. Some will respond best to kava, others to GABA or something else. **Do not be discouraged** if you don't find the best remedy for you right away. It can be a bit of a trial and error process.

St. John's Wort

The last remedy mentioned here is **St. John's Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*)**, and it is currently the leading treatment for depression in Germany and is gaining a great deal of popularity here in the US. It is an herb that has been shown to be as effective as conventional drugs for **mild to moderate depression**, but with far fewer and less severe side effects. Although this article deals with the topic of anxiety, St John's Wort merits considerable mention since so many cases of anxiety either coincide with depression or end up in depression. The symptoms of depression that seem to respond

most favorably to St. John's wort are **decreased activity levels, fatigue, anxiety, feelings of worthlessness and disturbed sleep.**

St John's Wort seems to do the job of SSRI's (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) and MAO's, (monamine oxidase inhibitors) **without the side effects** of either. In a randomized, placebo-controlled double blind study, 70% of the patients treated with St. John's Wort were free of symptoms after 4 weeks. Unlike kava which works rapidly, St. John's Wort takes approximately a month before its effects can be felt. St John's Wort **does not cause sedation**, and mild side effects are observed in only 2.5% of cases. The standard dose is 300mg taken 3x/daily.

We can all tolerate a little stress, and it may actually be **good for us**. It can motivate us, give us a competitive edge, and help us accomplish things we did not think were possible. **Chronic anxiety, however, can be devastating.** Luckily, there are natural remedies available for relieving anxiety and depression, like Kava, GABA and St. John's Wort, amongst others. Some say there are natural remedies for all sickness and suffering known to human kind; "Health through God's Pharmacy," or so it has been called. With expert guidance, many anxiety sufferers will be able to forego potentially dangerous medications in their pursuit of a calmer, more serene life.

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