

The Depressing News About Antidepressants

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Are you like me? When the mainstream media covers a health issue, do you cringe and say no, that's not right? There are many reasons for their bias, but I'm always encouraged when they get it right.

A Newsweek cover story on antidepressant drugs broke in February, 2010. The cover of the magazine shows a pill in tears with the quote "Antidepressants Don't Work." How's this for a direct quote, "Studies suggest that the popular drugs are no more effective than a placebo. In fact they may be worse." Considering the U.S. spent an estimated 9.6 BILLION dollars in 2008 on antidepressants, it's interesting that the article hasn't received more media attention.

The story by Sharon Begley centers around the work of



Irving Kirsch and his recent book, The Emperor's New Drugs: Exploding the Antidepressant Myth. Kirsch and colleagues have spent well over a decade looking at data and trying to make sense of the fact that some people have had life changing effects from antidepressants. Yet when the data is seen clearly, there doesn't seem to be any difference whether study participants received the drugs themselves or the placebo.

For example, in 1998 they procured 47 published and non-published drug company sponsored studies on the major antidepressants prescribed today that were submitted to the FDA via the freedom of information act. "They found that about 82% of the response to antidepressants had also been achieved by a dummy pill."

A 2010 study in JAMA titled, "Antidepressant Drug Effects and Depression Severity: A Patient-Level Meta-Analysis" looked at another six studies involving 718 patients and came to similar conclusions: "The magnitude of benefit of antidepressant medication compared with placebo increases with severity of depression symptoms and may be minimal or nonexistent, on average, in patients

with mild or moderate symptoms."

For this discussion, I won't debate the effects of whether people feel better on the Pharma cocktails or not. But let's look at what appears to be the major effect of taking the drug: The "power of belief in the medical treatment." Many people laugh at the concept of taking the sugar pill or placebo; yet according to Kirsch and others, the results are virtually the same.

Rather than just saying it's only a placebo, shouldn't we be looking at the amazing power of the human brain? What an amazing ability to synthesize mood and brain altering chemicals like opiates or neurotransmitters by the "what we believe factor." Knowing this, it is important to ask ourselves the question, are we taking advantage of our communication skills in such a way that we impart confidence and belief in the nutritional and therapeutic recommendations we make?

As natural practitioners, we know that common nutrients like fish oil, vitamin D, St. John's Wort, SAM-e, balancing zinc /copper levels, B vitamins (particularly folic acid and B6), and an anti-inflammatory diet have shown great promise clinically with depression. Also, full spectrum light therapies and exercise have substantial effects on mood. We all have stories of life changing successes when we simply balance the body's bio-chemistry.

In terms of communicating, Dr. George Goodheart, a physician for over 60 years,

used to tell patients 3 different times in 3 different ways how the treatment that he was recommending would help them.

Here is an example of how he might explain fish oil to his patients:

Fish oil will help balance the inflammatory pathways in the body and as a result you will have less pain.

A few minutes later he might say, "You will feel better as the pain is decreased, primarily from the fish oil reducing inflammation."

Finally, as they leave the consultation, he might say something like this, "You know, systemic inflammation will cause pain and fish oil will reduce the inflammation."

Three ways of saying the same thing with one goal: to impart understanding. This increases the belief that the program being recommended will work. Being "on purpose" about our recommendations will make a difference in how people follow our instructions.

I used to think that a recommendation is only effective if it's followed. Dr. Kirsch's work shows us that "how much our recommendation is believed" may be even more important. Just a reminder, our words CAN make a difference.

Thanks for reading this week's edition. I'll see you again next Tuesday.