

Overcoming Stress and Depression: How I Got There (Part 1)



Depression can be thought of as the exhaustive stage of stress, so I will address them together. They both can be incapacitating, and getting motivated to do anything is very difficult. You know that you should eat better and that exercise would help you lose weight, and you are told that you will feel better, too, but somehow you find that you cannot muster up the energy and have no reserves to draw from to take that initial step. I don't recall how long I sat on the sidelines before I decided to take that first step and participate in life. But when I did, little by little the depression started to leave. I found that simple measures brought profound results.



For example, because I was obese, I was encouraged to start exercising, and a friend led the way. This was the shot in the arm that I needed to boost my mood. Regular exercise increases serotonin levels, and studies show that exercise is more effective than antidepressants in relieving depression ("Exercise Better than Drugs," 2000). Not only does exercise boost serotonin levels, but it also increases the production of BDNF (brain derived neurotropic factor). BDNF is a protein that is essential for cell repair and reduces the toxic effect of cortisol. Depression decreases BDNF; exercise rebuilds it (Shirayama, Chen, Nakagawa, Russell, & Duman, 2002).

Although I did not have a clue as to what I was doing, I was achieving several benefits all at one time with just exercise. Exercise balanced my brain chemistry, brought down my cortisol levels, increased my BDNF, and restored neurochemicals, which enhanced my mood.

I then changed my diet and started to feed my brain the nutrients it needed to help make repairs. I stopped eating junk food and started eating fruits and vegetables. Junk food is high in fat, sugar, and salt, and these are irritants to the body, another cause of inflammation. Fruits and vegetables, however, provide antioxidants that decrease inflammation. Since then I have learned a lot about healthy foods – omega-3 fatty acids (key for brain health), and flavonoids and resveratrol found in fruits and vegetables. I learned that they are also loaded with antioxidants. I learned about lycopene, lutein, and carotene, all found in carotenoids, which are powerful chemicals found in fruits and vegetables. These foods decrease inflammation and minimize the effects of free radical damage, just what my brain needed.



--excerpt taken from *Mind-Body-God Connection, How I Found Healing, A New Way Of Looking At Disease* by Darlene D. Hall, RN. Xulon Press, 2010.

References:

Exercise better than drugs for depression. (2000, September/October). *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 62, 633-638.

Shirayama, Y, Chen, A. C. H., Nakagawa, S., Russell, D. S., Duman, R. S. (2002, April 15). Brain-derived neurotrophic factor produces antidepressant effects in behavioral models of depression. *The Journal of Neuroscience*, 22, 3251-3261. Retrieved from <http://www.jneurosci.org/cgi/content/full/22/8/3251>.