

# MOODS

Serving People with Unipolar and Bipolar Illness, Their Families and Friends, since 1981

January 2020

## Self Help for Mental Health

### Part 1

By Tory Masters

There is now scientific evidence for three ways in which we can greatly reduce the symptoms of our mental health disorders on our own – in some cases up to 50% - substantially increasing our sense of wellbeing with lasting results.

These three approaches, when practiced consistently, actually reduce the activity of the brain associated with depression, unhappiness and anxiety and increase the activity of the brain associated with wellbeing and contentment. And the good news is that they do not require a lot of work or time, other than a willingness to use them in our everyday lives. The three practices include:

Mindfulness Meditation: The regular practice of Mindful Meditation – *the act of paying attention only to the present moment you are in* - has proven to increase a sense of wellbeing by up to 50% in studies conducted by Yale and Harvard.

Changing Our Eating Habits: What we eat contributes dramatically to the quality of our mental health. *Turns out our brains are affected most by what we feed it.* We can make nutritional adjustments that can help prevent the rise of mental health disorders and work to reverse the symptoms.

The Power of Getting Ourselves Moving! With regular exercise – *choose anything you like to do whether walking the dog, swimming or dancing* – you can reduce depression and anxiety no matter what your age or where you live.

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## Bipolar Disorder and Chrono Therapies

By David Brody, M.D.;

The start of a new year prompts reflections on the achievements of the year that just ended. Medical research published the previous year allows us to take stock of where we've come from and where the field might be headed. In 2019, noteworthy papers addressed topics such as physical exercise as a treatment for depression, the use of lithium in pregnancy, and the genetic similarities among various psychiatric disorders that challenges our current diagnostic classification system.

A review article describing the practical use of chronobiological therapies was particularly engaging. Chronotherapy in psychiatry seeks to leverage our understanding of biological rhythms in order to ameliorate depression, mania, and related conditions such as insomnia. Last year, the International Society of Bipolar Disorders published a survey of research on several types of chronotherapies for bipolar disorder: bright light therapy, sleep deprivation or wake therapy-based treatments, dark therapy, melatonin, and behavioral therapies (interpersonal/social rhythm therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia adapted to bipolar disorders.) An expert panel reviewed multiple studies published on each chronotherapy and summarized their assessment of the evidence for and against each of the treatments.

There were some surprising results. Bright light therapy was as effective as medication for bipolar depression and carried little risk of causing mania. There are several kinds of bright light devices that can be used for varying

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## Bipolar Disorder and Chrono Therapies

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lengths of time and at different times of day. The experts found that bright light therapy was ineffective for mania but that dark therapy, which involves having patients wear special glasses that block certain wavelengths of light and create “virtual darkness,” was effective for mania. They note that some psychiatric hospitals provide such glasses to patients admitted for acute manic episodes. Sleep deprivation therapy, which requires patients to sleep only a few hours for several nights, is understandably difficult to implement, but has been shown to be occasionally effective for bipolar depression. Melatonin,

while effective for insomnia, was not found to have much effect on bipolar depression or mania. Finally, specialized psychotherapies that coach patients to establish and maintain “interpersonal and social rhythms” (e.g., time out of bed, first contact with another person, start of daily activity, dinner, and time to bed) or to improve sleep habits can be effective adjuncts to medication treatment for depression and maintaining remission from active bipolar symptoms.

The treatment of bipolar disorder is often complicated and frustrating, and our medication treatments are far from being 100% effective. It is reassuring to know that there are safe, effective and

comparatively straightforward treatments that can be paired with medication to help patients experience fewer periods of depression, mania and mood instability.

Reference: Gottlieb JF et al. The chronotherapeutic treatment of bipolar disorders: A systematic review and practice recommendations from the ISBD Task Force on Chronotherapy and Chronobiology. *Bipolar Disorder* 2019 Oct 14; [e-pub]. (<https://doi.org/10.1111/BDI.12847>)

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### Items of Interest

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[GEN EMAIL CAMPAIGN COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_c648d0eafd-40a44de6c8-30398969](https://blogs.psychcentral.com/imperfect/2020/01/20-affirmations-for-2020/?utm_source=Psych+Central+Weekly+Newsletter&utm_campaign=40a44de6c8-30398969)

Mood Disorders Support Group  
New York  
**MOODS**

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# Self Help for Mental Health: Part 1

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In this newsletter we will focus on Mindfulness Meditation. The next parts will cover nutrition and exercise.

## MINDFULNESS MEDITATION (MM)

When was the last time you really caught your breath - enjoyed every bite of your ice cream, contentedly lost yourself in a book, relished every moment of a massage. Many of us would agree that we are in an almost constant state of distraction: mind wandering - ruminating about the past or worrying about the immediate future.

Constant mind wandering prevents us from being truly present in a given moment. *Studies have borne out that MM practice decreases activity in the default mode network (DMN), the brain network responsible for mind-wandering and negative thinking. MM has a quieting effect on the DMN. And even when the mind does start to wander, because of the regular practice, meditators are better at snapping back out of it.*

A team at Harvard found that mindfulness meditation rivals the effects of antidepressants and can actually change the structure of the brain. Eight weeks of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) was found to increase

cortical thickness in the hippocampus which governs memory and learning and can strengthen certain areas of the brain that play roles in emotion regulation. There were also decreases in brain cell volume in the amygdala which is responsible for fear, anxiety and stress. After meditation training, changes in the brain areas linked to mood and arousal were also linked to improvements in how participants said they felt - i.e., their psychological well-being.

A lot of people have this idea that meditation means sitting down and doing nothing. Not true. Meditation is an active training of the mind to increase awareness. The simplest definition of mindfulness is paying attention to one's experience in the moment, whether standing on line at a checkout counter, eating a meal or hanging out with a friend. It involves observing thoughts and emotions from moment to moment without judging them negatively or becoming caught up in them. If at the checkout counter you can notice what you are experiencing. Is it frustration, a tightness in the chest, resentment about the long wait, or are you enjoying talking to others in line and not letting yourself get stressed about what you can't control? If with your friend, notice what you are experiencing. Is it ease

and enjoyment or stress at not feeling heard, or perhaps feelings of competitiveness? If eating, are you actually savoring every bite or are you wolfing down food in order to make a meeting on time? The goal is to simply notice what you are actually feeling and experiencing physically in the moment. The goal is to observe yourself with interest and curiosity, not judgement.

MM can also be practiced daily in any quiet spot you can find. Example: You can sit with your eyes closed and practice deep breathing. You can stand at a window - what do you see, smell or hear? Just a few minutes a day of allowing yourself to be totally present can make a significant difference in your sense of well-being. See the links below to get you started on your path to living well!

<https://www.nytimes.com/guides/well/how-to-meditate>  
<https://www.verywellmind.com/mindfulness-meditation-88369>  
<https://www.yogiapproved.com/om/top-10-meditation-mindfulness-brain-health-websites-apps/>  
<http://gretschmelzer.com/blog-1/2014/11/13/the-top-5-websites-for-exploring-and-practicing-mindfulness>  
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