

A clarification on depression

“SAFE solution for depression” (Alternative Healing Special Feature, Dec 18) refers. Some of the information needs clarification.

1) It was mentioned that “neurotransmitter test identifies whether a patient has low serotonin and if they do, appropriate psycho-nutritional supplements can be recommended...”

Yes, it is true that one of the factors contributing to depression is low serotonin level. However, “neurotransmitter test” is NOT the usual way how mental health professionals (eg clinical psychologist, psychiatrist, registered counsellors) assess and diagnose depression. The scientific validity of “neurotransmitter test” for diagnosing depression has not been established. Therefore, one will NOT be offered such a test in routine clinical practice for diagnosing depression. Then, how is depression diagnosed?

These are the steps that mental health professionals would usually do:

- ▶ Get to know your background
- ▶ Enquire about signs and symptoms of depression and other psychological disorders
- ▶ May clarify and confirm the signs and symptoms with your friends or family (only with your consent)
- ▶ May help you to identify the factors that contribute to your depression
- ▶ A psychiatrist or medical doctor may do physical examinations and blood investigations if necessary (eg for thyroid disease that may contribute to depression).
- ▶ Educate you and your friend or family on depression
- ▶ Ask about your previous treatments for depression and propose a treatment plan, eg talk therapies with or without antidepressant medications
- ▶ May monitor your progress with certain validated psychological questionnaires, eg Beck Depression Inventory.

2) It was reported that “Anti-Depression Psychotherapy is a treatment that helps the patient mitigate their conditions by challenging their thinking, emotions and behaviour.”

Yes, there are several

effective psychotherapies or talk therapies for depression (eg cognitive behavioural therapy, interpersonal psychotherapy, marital therapy, problem solving therapy, art therapy). But, we are not aware of any psychotherapy by the name of “Anti-Depression Psychotherapy”, as reported. The choice of psychotherapy will depend on many factors (eg causes of depression, patient’s preference, therapist’s expertise, affordability of treatment fee).

3) It was cited that “this is the advantage of dealing with depression using psychotherapy instead of medication.” Some readers may misinterpret this to mean “Anti-Depression Psychotherapy” and “Psycho-nutritional supplements” are good replacements for medication. This statement may confuse the public because antidepressant medication is an integral part of treatment for some patients (eg those with severe depression, depression with psychosis), which goes hand-in-hand with scientifically proven psycho-social and nutritional treatments. Stopping medications for depression abruptly and without professional advice is a serious matter and could lead to worsening of illness or even suicide.

Hence, it is advisable that such decision should only be made after discussing with a psychiatrist.

4) Which is the best treatment? Antidepressant medication, psychotherapy or psycho-nutritional supplements? There is no best or one-size-fits-all treatment for depression. Effective treatment depends on many factors (eg type of depression, severity of depression, factors contributing to depression, patient’s preference, and therapist’s experience). Hence, it is helpful to consult a mental health professional to discuss an individualised and comprehensive treatment plan.

Readers who are interested in learning more about depression from a local context may refer to the e-book, *I’m Still Human: Understanding Depression with Kindness* by Dr Phang Cheng Kar.

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