

Beating Stress, Anxiety & Depression Groundbreaking Ways to Help You Feel Better

By Jane Plant and Janet Stephenson. Foreword by Stephen Holgate

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This is an intriguing book. Professor Jane Plant is Professor of Environmental Geochemistry at Imperial College London, and her co-author, Janet Stephenson, is a psychologist who works as a therapist in the NHS and in private practice. The authors point out that one person in six may suffer from chronic anxiety or depression, and many others do so temporarily. They explain in detail how they each suffered from both anxiety and depression, and how they felt that doctors, both in primary and in secondary care, failed to deal effectively and sympathetically with their problems. Jane experienced years of chronic anxiety after taking benzodiazepines to counteract the stress of cancer treatment, while Janet suffered from psychosis which followed postnatal depression, and led to her spending several months in a frightening mental institution. The authors explain how they managed, with help, to overcome their problems. In a thoughtful foreword, Professor Stephen Holgate remarks that the authors gained clear insight into their own difficulties and how to resolve them, while concurrently applying scientific rigour to understand and convey what processes may have caused their problems. The authors claim that readers of this book will discover:

- a) risk factors and how to reduce them;
- b) how mental health problems can be diagnosed more effectively;
- c) how to ensure the best possible treatment;
- d) how to acquire information on alternative approaches;
- e) the ten lifestyle factors that can decrease the chances of mental illness;
- f) the ten food factors that can improve mental wellbeing.

I have tried, as a neurologist with some experience in treating mood disorders, to assess the extent to which the authors have succeeded. I believe that they have achieved most if not all of their objectives. First, they deploy a remarkable understanding of neuroscience and the ways in which biochemical changes in the brain can result in the genesis and persistence of mood disorders. They also describe the complex symptomatology of anxiety and depression, and outline a classification much in line with scientific thought. Neurotransmitter function and dysfunction in mental illness are well described, as are their outlines of brain/mind/body interactions and modern neurophysiology, although I was surprised to find that acetylcholine as a neurotransmitter was not mentioned until page 201. Their outline of risk factors in chapter four is largely indisputable, as are their views on getting the best treatment in chapter five; they pay appropriate lip service, not only to the role of drugs, but also to the

physical factors which may influence the mood, while also stressing the important role of counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy and other psychotherapeutic methods.

Where they are on less certain ground is in their acceptance of the role of measuring urinary catecholamines and other metabolites in diagnosis, and their espousal of amino acid therapy, based largely on the work of Lechin, whose views are not totally in tune with current neuroscience thought. They are, however, right to criticise electro-convulsion therapy and psychosurgery, while recognising that trans-cranial magnetic stimulation and deep brain stimulation may sometimes be useful in treating depression. Most of their comments on lifestyle changes and the value of exercise and rest and relaxation are unexceptionable, but they are less convincing in their comments on environmental issues, not least in relation to the potential harmful effects of pesticides. All neuroscientists appreciate the hazards produced by organo-phosphorus insecticides, but when the authors suggest, for example, the possible risks from exposure to pesticides when walking a golf course, they have a less firm scientific foundation (I write as a golfer). I was also mildly discomforted by their comprehensive chapter on nutrition and the role of food factors. This chapter contains much common sense, but their espousal of the organic food movement, along with their view that most protein in our diet should be from plant and not animal sources, have a less secure scientific foundation. They are, of course, fully entitled to express their personal opinions upon what they have found useful and helpful, but I was a little concerned to find that, whereas 90% of this book offers recommendations based upon sound scientific fact and reasoning, the authors espouse enthusiastically some which are not in my opinion evidence-based or in tune with well-accepted scientific principles.

These are relatively minor quibbles, as this is an admirable book which should do much, as Stephen Holgate says, to alleviate the fear, helplessness and hopelessness which many feel when suffering from mental ill health. The book ends with a helpful list of organisations working in mental health, and there are useful lists of scientific references as well as a recommended list of books for further reading. There is also a good index. I must conclude therefore that many sufferers from stress, anxiety and depression will find in this volume invaluable information, guidance and comfort.

Lord Walton of Detchant