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## Help for the Winter Blahs

By Lorelei Laird



Even in Southern California, the cold and dark of winter can be hard to handle. As the days get shorter, people who are sensitive to lack of sunlight can feel sad or lethargic. The early part of the new year, after the holidays are over, is considered the lowest-energy time in the 12-month annual cycle.

Anthropologists believe winter holidays are supposed to fight the winter blahs. But with their relentless messages of togetherness, the media can leave out anyone who doesn't fit into a conventional nuclear family, as well as single people. And the holidays bring well-known financial and personal stress into all kinds of lives.

If this sounds familiar, don't compensate by filling up on mulled wine or pumpkin pie. Instead, consider restoring balance to your life with herbal remedies—natural ways to fight winter depression, anxiety and more without nasty side effects.

### Herbal “SSRIs”

If you're feeling depressed by a lack of sunlight or other life shifts, no herbal remedy has been so thoroughly studied as St. John's wort. More than a decade of research has established that *Hypericum perforatum* is more effective than a placebo at treating mild to moderate depression, and it's widely prescribed by mainstream doctors in Germany. It's available in capsules, extracts and teas, so you can enjoy it as a hot beverage on cold days.

Scientists believe St. John's wort works similarly to a class of prescription antidepressants called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, but without their serious side effects. However, the herb does interfere with certain prescription drugs, including antiretrovirals and contraceptives, and can cause a life-threatening reaction to prescription antidepressants, so be sure to talk to a health professional before taking it.

### Calming Herbs

If your problem is anxiety or insomnia, your best herbal remedy may be the root of the kava plant, known in

Hawai‘ian as ‘awa. This is a relative of the plant that gives us peppercorns, and it’s traditionally used as a mild intoxicant in Polynesian cultures. Western scientists have confirmed that it has sedative and anti-anxiety effects, but does not interfere with thinking—or carry the side effects of prescription anxiolytics. Kava supplements have been associated with liver problems, especially when overused, but research on this has been inconclusive. If you have liver problems, drink a lot of alcohol or are pregnant, talk to a medical professional first.

Kava is sold in caplets, tea and extracts, but it’s also available as a powdered drink, which is closest to the traditional preparation. A few companies are even making bottled kava “anti-energy” drinks, though none are yet sold in the continental U.S.

Kava isn’t the only herbal remedy for anxiety, but it’s the most thoroughly studied. Scientists have also found some evidence for the effectiveness of:

- Lavender aromatherapy. Lavender is widely available as an oil, an extract and in bath products. You can also find culinary lavender at Hispanic and specialty markets, and the plant is widely used in local landscaping.
- Passion flower, specifically, the leaves of *Passiflora incarnata*, which are used by South American cultures to make a sedative tea or cigarettes. The dried herb is commercially available, along with caplets or extracts.
- Chamomile. Studies have found this traditional remedy really is effective against anxiety and insomnia. Look for teas, whole flowers, caplets and extracts with *Marticaria recutita*, because several plants go by “chamomile.”
- Magnolia bark, a traditional Chinese anxiety treatment. You can buy it in the U.S. as a pill, powder or extract, but watch the ingredients of supplements from overseas.

Many of these are sold mixed with other herbal remedies. Scientists have turned up little evidence for the effectiveness of anti-anxiety plants like valerian root, catnip or hops—or blends like Rescue Remedy—but also little evidence that they can do harm.

No matter what you choose, medical professionals across the spectrum would add that you should complement any herbal regimen with basic self-care. Whether that means more time exercising, getting enough sleep or skipping obligations you hate, that’s advice worth taking at any time of year.

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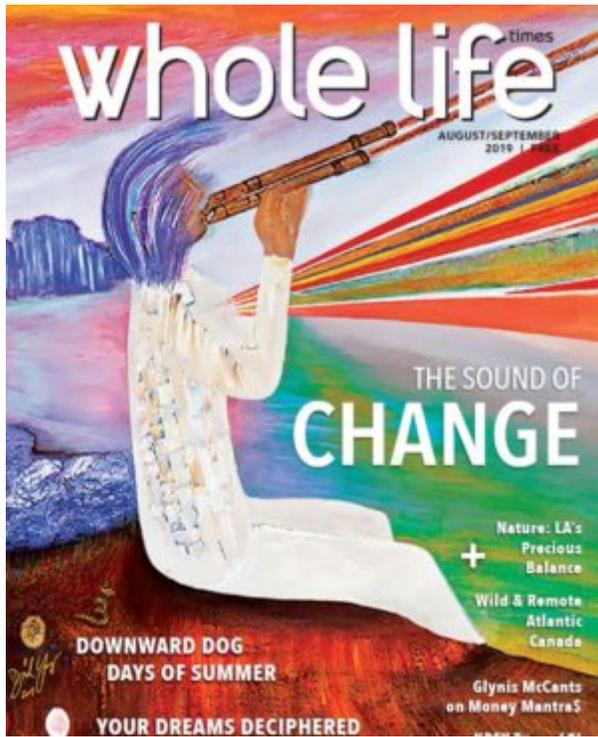
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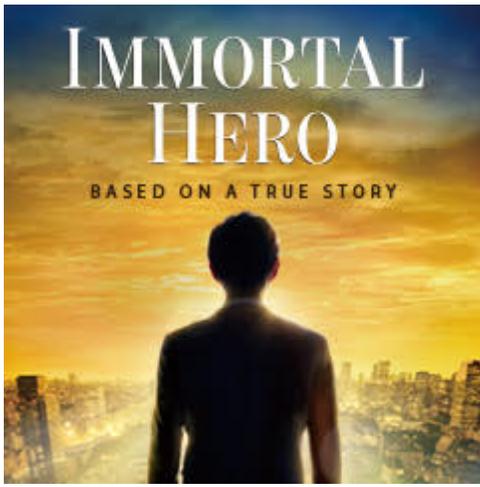
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