

Complementary and alternative treatments

Some people with mental health problems find using complementary and alternative treatments helpful. This factsheet explains what complementary therapies are and how you can get them.



KEY POINTS

- Complementary and alternative treatments are health-related treatments which are not part of mainstream medical care. They are thought to increase wellbeing, aid relaxation and promote good mental health.
- You can use complementary and alternative treatments for different mental health needs.
- There is not much research about how well complementary and alternative therapies work.
- Not all complementary and alternative therapies are regulated. It is important to make sure the person who gives you the therapy is qualified.

This factsheet covers:

1. [What are complementary and alternative treatments?](#)
2. [Can I use complementary and alternative treatments for mental health problems?](#)
3. [What types of complementary and alternative treatments are used?](#)
4. [Where can I get complementary and alternative treatments?](#)

1. What are complementary and alternative treatments?

Complementary and alternative treatments are not part of mainstream care. This means that you are unlikely to get this type of treatment through the NHS.¹ They can be used to complement your NHS treatment. Or in some cases, as an alternative to NHS treatment. You may hear them being called 'holistic treatments'.

Different complementary and alternative treatments can help with different symptoms. They can focus on your physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing.

[Top](#)

2. Can I use complementary and alternative treatments for mental health problems?

You can use complementary and alternative treatments with other treatments. But there is not much scientific evidence to say they can help treat mental illness.² Many people find them useful, even though there isn't much evidence.³ They can be useful to deal with side effects of medication and symptoms of mental illness.

Speak to your GP or mental health team if you are interested in complementary and alternative treatments.

[Top](#)

3. What types of complementary and alternative medicines are there?

- Acupuncture
- Aromatherapy
- Herbal Medicine
- Homeopathy
- Massage
- Meditation
- Spiritual/ energy healing
- Yoga

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is based on an ancient Chinese treatment. An acupuncture practitioner will put small, thin needles into your skin at certain points on your body. The needles can help to start the healing process in your body.⁴

Some acupuncture practitioners say it can be used to treat mental health conditions. There is some research into its uses for depression,⁵ schizophrenia⁶ and insomnia.⁷ But there is not much scientific evidence to prove that acupuncture is good at treating mental illness.

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy uses essential oils to improve health and wellbeing.⁸ Essential oils are plant extracts. Some oils can be used to treat mental and emotional health problems. You can use aromatherapy oils through massage, in the bath or by breathing them in. Research has shown that aromatherapy can be useful to treat symptoms of depression and anxiety.⁹

Herbal medicine

Herbal medicine is made from plants. Sometimes it is called herbal remedies. Many mainstream drugs and medicines are based on herbal medicines.¹⁰ You can get herbal medicine in different forms such as liquid, powder or cream. A qualified herbalist can prescribe herbal medicine to use alongside other medications and treatment. Sometimes herbal medication can have a bad effect on a condition that you have or medication that you take. You should always talk to your doctor or a pharmacist before taking herbal remedies.

The table below has some of the common herbal remedies used for treating mental health conditions.

Name	Uses
St John's Wort ¹¹	Depression
Valerian ¹²	Anxiety
Passion Flower ¹³	Anxiety, nervous tension, mild sedative
Bach Flower Remedies ¹⁴	Anxiety, panic, trauma
Roseroot / Rhodiola ¹⁵	Stress, anxiety, tiredness
Sage ¹⁶	Depression and anxiety, improving memory
Camomile ¹⁷	Mild sedative

Homeopathy

Homeopathy is based on the idea that a substance that causes certain symptoms can also help to reduce those symptoms. Substances are watered down and shaken. Homeopathy practitioners believe that the substance will be more effective to treat symptoms if it is watered down by a large amount.¹⁸

There are homeopathic treatments for different health conditions including depression and anxiety.¹⁹

The National Institute of Care Excellence (NICE) does not recommend homeopathic medicines for the treatment of health conditions because there is not enough medical evidence that they work. But some NHS GPs and hospitals offer homeopathy.²⁰

Massage

A massage therapist will use their hands to rub your body to help get rid of tension and help you to relax. There are different types of massage including the following.

- Swedish massage. Light strokes are used to relax muscles to relieve tension.
- Shiatsu massage. Pressure is put on certain points to help balance your energy.²¹

Mindfulness and meditation

Mindfulness is a type of meditation. It is when you focus on your mind and body. It is a way of paying attention to the present moment. An example would be to focus on your breathing. Think about how it feels when you breathe in and out. When you practice meditation or mindfulness you learn to be more aware of your thoughts and feelings. Once you are more aware of your thoughts and feelings, you can learn to deal with them better.

Mindfulness based cognitive behavioural therapy (MBCBT) is a combination of mindfulness and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). The National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommend MBCBT to treat depression. A course of MBCBT should last for 8 weeks. You will usually have MBCBT in a group. Each session is 2 hours long. You should have 4 follow-up sessions in 12 months after the end of your therapy.²²

You can also get mindfulness courses through self-help guides or mobile apps.

You can find out more information about cognitive behavioural therapy in our, '**Talking Therapies**' factsheet at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

Spiritual and energy healing

People who use spiritual or energy healing believe that you have a 'physical body' and an 'energy body'. Spiritual or energy healers believe that your 'energy body' affects your mental health. A practitioner helps to fix your energy body.²³ They do this by putting their hands above your body in certain places. Reiki is a well known energy healing therapy in England.

Reiki may help with symptoms of depression and stress after 6 weekly sessions. There is not much research into the effects of energy healing for people with mental illness.²⁴

Yoga

Yoga is an exercise. It has a focus on breathing techniques, strength and flexibility to improve your mental and physical wellbeing. Yoga can help to reduce depression and stress.²⁵

4. Where can I get complementary and alternative treatments?

The NHS does not usually offer complementary and alternative treatments. You may be able to get complementary and alternative treatments through the following ways.

- Private therapist or practitioner
- Alternative therapy centre
- Health spa
- Mental health charity

How do I choose a practitioner or therapist?

Complementary therapists do not have to register with a professional body to treat people. You should check if a private therapist is a member of a professional body such as the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC). To become a member a therapist will have to meet certain standards set by the professional body. A therapist that is a member of a professional body will also have to follow the code of ethics and complaints procedure.²⁶

Many types of treatments have their own professional body. They set standards for their therapists to follow. They hold registers for qualified practitioners. There is a list of professional bodies at the end of this factsheet.

Think about the following points when you choose your complementary therapist.

- Compare the cost of treatments.
- Make sure that you are not being over-charged.
- Ask the therapist about their qualifications, membership of a professional body and how long they have been practising.
- Always make sure the practitioner has the right insurance. Therapists should have insurance before they can become members of the CHNC or other professional bodies.
- Choose a complementary therapy that suits your needs. Other people may tell you what has worked for them. But remember that the results may be different for you.
- Know what to expect. Research the therapy. No reliable therapist should claim to be able to cure severe mental illness.

Ask your doctor or nurse for their advice. This is important if you want to try a therapy which involves medicine.

How much do complementary and alternative therapies cost?

Private therapists can be expensive. They can charge any price. Usually they will charge around £40-£70 per hour. You can ask your GP if the therapy you want is available on the NHS. The National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) may recommend a complementary or

alternative treatment. You can ask your local Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) if the therapy is available in your area. You can find your local PALS on their website www.pals.nhs.uk.

You may be able to get low cost or free complementary and alternative treatment. But this is unusual. You can use an online search engine such as Google to see what is available in your local area.

[Top](#)



FURTHER
READING

Complementary and alternative medicine

The NHS has information about complementary and alternative treatments for some health needs through their website.

Website: <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/complementary-alternative-medicine/Pages/complementary-alternative-medicines.aspx>



USEFUL
CONTACTS

The Alliance of Registered Homeopaths (ARH)

A UK professional organisation that supports and promotes a high standard of safe, effective homeopathic practice.

Telephone: 01825 714506

Address: Millbrook, Millbrook Hill, Nutley, East Sussex, TN22 3PJ

Email: info@a-r-h.org

Website: www.a-r-h.org/

The Aromatherapy Council

A UK professional body that sets and maintain education standards for aromatherapy professionals.

Website: www.aromatherapycouncil.org.uk

The Association of Natural Medicine

The organisation runs training for all practitioners in the UK. They have a governing council which holds at least 8 meetings a year.

Telephone 01376 502762

Address: 27 Braintree Road, Witham, Essex, CM8 2DD

Email: a-nm@hotmail.co.uk

Website: www.associationnaturalmedicine.co.uk

Association of Reflexologists (AoR)

A UK professional regulatory body. They give advice to reflexologists and work with other regulatory bodies.

Telephone: 01823 351010

Address: Victoria House, Victoria Street, Taunton, Somerset, TA1 3FA

Email: info@aur.org.uk
Website: www.aur.org.uk

The British Acupuncture Council (BAcC)

A self-regulatory body of therapists who practice traditional acupuncture in the UK.

Telephone: 0208 735 0400
Address: 63 Jeddo Road, London, W12 9HQ
Email: info@acupuncture.org.uk
Website: www.acupuncture.org.uk

British Complementary Medicine Association

An international umbrella organisation for therapists and their clients.

Telephone: 0845 345 5977
Address: BCMA, P.O. Box 5122, Bournemouth, BH8 0WG
Email: office@bcma.co.uk
Website: www.bcma.co.uk

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council

An independent regulatory body for some complementary therapies.

Telephone: 020 3668 0406
Address: 46 – 48 East Smithfield, London, E1W 1AW
Email: info@cnhc.org.uk
Website: www.cnhc.org.uk

Complementary Medical Association

An association for complementary therapists in the UK. They promote ethical, responsible and professional complementary medicine.

Telephone: 0845 129 8434
Email: Contact form on website
Website: www.the-cma.org.uk

The Complementary Therapies Association

An association that represents sports, spa and complementary therapists in the UK and Ireland.

Telephone: 0845 202 2941
Address: 2nd floor, Chiswick Gate, 598-608 Chiswick High Road, London W4 5RT
Email: info@ctha.com
Website: www.ctha.com

Federation of Holistic Therapists

The largest professional association for therapists in the UK and Ireland. Therapies include sports and remedial therapies, complementary healthcare and holistic beauty treatments.

Telephone: 023 8062 4350

Address: 18 Shakespeare Business Centre, Hathaway Close, Eastleigh, Hampshire, SO50 4SR

Email: info@fht.org.uk

Website: www.fht.org.uk

The National Institute of Medical Herbalists

A UK professional body representing herbal practitioners. You can search for qualified herbalists on their website. They also have an information service for professionals and the public about herbal medicine.

Telephone: 01392 426022

Address: Clover House, James Court, South Street, Exeter, EX1 1EE

Email: info@nimh.org.uk

Website: www.nimh.org.uk/

The Shiatsu Society UK

A non-profit organisation that represents practitioners and promotes professionalism.

Telephone: 0845 130 4560

Address: Shiatsu Society UK, P.O. Box 4580, Rugby, Warwickshire, CV21 9EL

Email: admin@shiatusociety.org

Website: www.shiatusociety.org/



¹NHS. *Complementary and alternative medicine*.

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/complementary-alternative-medicine/Pages/complementary-alternative-medicines.aspx> (Accessed 18th August 2016).

² The Royal College of Psychiatrists. *Complementary and alternative medicines*.

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/treatmentswellbeing/complementarytherapy.aspx> (Accessed 18th August 2016).

³ As note 2

⁴The British Acupuncture Organisation. *What is traditional acupuncture?*

http://www.acupuncture.org.uk/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&layout=item&id=218&Itemid=100 (accessed 18th August 2016).

⁵ Smith, C. et al. Acupuncture for depression. *Journal of alternative and Complementary medicine* 2010 http://www.cochrane.org/CD004046/DEPRESSN_acupuncture-for-depression (accessed 8th September 2016).

⁶ Shen X, Xia J, Adams CE. Acupuncture for schizophrenia. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2014, Issue 10. Art. No.: CD005475.

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD005475.pub2/abstract> (accessed 8th September 2016).

⁶ [Huijuan Cao](#), M.D., Ph.D.(Cand.), [Xingfang Pan](#), M.D., [Hua Li](#), M.A.(Cand.), and [Jianping Liu](#), M.D., Ph.D. Acupuncture for Treatment of Insomnia: A Systematic

-
- Review of Randomized Controlled Trials. *J. Altern Complement Med.* 2009 Nov 15(11). <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3156618/> (accessed 21st September 2016)
- ⁸ Aromatherapy Council. *What is Aromatherapy?* <http://www.aromatherapycouncil.org.uk/#!treatments/cee5> (Accessed 18th August 2016)
- ⁹ Lemon, K. An assessment of treating depression and anxiety with aromatherapy. *International Journal of Aromatherapy* 2004 14(2) page 63-69. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S096245620400027X> (accessed 23rd September 2016)
- ¹⁰ British Herbal Medicine Association. *What can herbal medicine offer me?* <http://bhma.info/index.php/what-can-herbal-medicine-offer-me/>. (Accessed 8th September 2016)
- ¹¹ Linde K, Berner MM, Kriston L. *St John's wort for major depression.* *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine* 2008. http://www.cochrane.org/CD000448/DEPRESSN_st-johns-wort-for-treating-depression. (accessed 23rd September 2016)
- ¹² The Royal College of Psychiatrists. *Complementary and alternative medicines.* www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/treatmentwellbeing/complementarytherapy.aspx (accessed 28th September 2016)
- ¹³ Vitamin Facts. *Passionflower.* (accessed 18th August 2016)
- ¹⁴ <http://www.bachcentre.com/centre/drbach.htm> (accessed 18th September 2016)
- ¹⁵ Panossian, A., et al., *Rosenroot (Rhodiola rosea): Traditional use, chemical composition, pharmacology and clinical efficacy.* *Phytomedicine* (2010), doi:10.1016/j.phymed.2010.02.002
- ¹⁶ As note 2 [(accessed 18th August 2016)]
- ¹⁷ As note 2 [(accessed 18th August 2016)]
- ¹⁸ NHS Choices. *Homeopathy* www.nhs.uk/Conditions/homeopathy/Pages/Introduction.aspx#What-is-it. (Accessed 8th September 2016)
- ¹⁹ British Homeopathic Association. *Helping People.* www.britishhomeopathic.org/what-is-homeopathy/conditions-homeopathy-is-used-for/helping-people/ (accessed 23rd September 2016)
- ²⁰ As note 21
- ²¹ Shiatsu Society. *About Shiatsu.* <http://www.shiatusociety.org/treatments/about-shiatsu> (Accessed 8th September 2016)
- ²² National Institute of Clinical Excellence. *Depression in Adults: recognition and treatment in adults.* Clinical Guidance 90. London: National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence; 2009. Page 34 (access 26th September 2016)
- ²³ UK Reiki Federation. *What is Reiki?* <http://www.reikifed.co.uk/about-us/what-s-reiki-faq> (Accessed 8th September 2016)
- ²⁴ Goldman A. Long-term effects of energetic healing on symptoms of psychological depression and self-perceived stress. *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine* 2004 10(3): Page 42-8. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15154152> (accessed 26th September 2016)
- ²⁵ NHS Choices. *A Guide to Yoga.* www.nhs.uk/Livewell/fitness/Pages/yoga.aspx (accessed 18th August 2016)
- ²⁶ Complementary and natural healthcare council. *About us.* http://www.cnhc.org.uk/index.cfm?page_id=15&sid=1 (accessed August 18th 2016)

© Rethink Mental Illness 2014
Last updated September 2016
Next update September 2019
Version: 6



This factsheet is available in large print.

Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0300 5000 927
Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm
(excluding bank holidays)

Email advice@rethink.org

Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you.

Drop us a line at: feedback@rethink.org

or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:
RAIS
PO Box 17106
Birmingham B9 9LL

or call us on 0300 5000 927.

We're open 9:30am to 4pm
Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)



Leading the way to a better quality of life for everyone affected by severe mental illness.

For further information
on Rethink Mental Illness
Phone 0121 522 7007
Email info@rethink.org

 [facebook.com/rethinkcharity](https://www.facebook.com/rethinkcharity)

 twitter.com/rethink_

 www.rethink.org

Need more help?

Go to **www.rethink.org** for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights.

Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0121 522 7007. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and we will send you the information you need in the post.

Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on 0300 5000 927 between 9:30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

Can you help us to keep going?

We can only help people because of donations from people like you. If you can donate please go to **www.rethink.org/donate** or call 0121 522 7007 to make a gift. We are very grateful for all our donors' generous support.



Rethink Mental Illness is a partner in:

