

Alternative medicine

explored

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Alternative medicine has been variously called 'natural', 'complementary', 'holistic' and numerous other terms which refer to elements of a particular tradition. 'Complementary' is the usually preferred term. The traditional ethno-medical systems are by nature holistic, meaning that they aim to treat the whole person, rather than a specific disease or symptom, and that they address not only the physical aspect of the patient but also mind and spirit. It is assumed that each individual possesses an innate healing capacity (the immune system in the broadest sense), and the goal is generally to restore strength and balance to weakened systems through the use of a variety of natural treatments, ranging from massage to the use of herbs and water.

Most are probably as old as the human race itself while other such as traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurveda (traditional Indian medicine) has a long recorded history.

The return of traditional medicine (conventional medicine is new medicine, not traditional) has brought with it a host of new ideas to add to those from ancient times. From homeopathy, founded at the start of the 19th century, osteopathy, and chiropractic, developed at the end of the same century, to those created in the 20th century - including radionics, radiesthesia, aromatherapy, reflexology, a mass of psychological and manipulative therapies, nutritional medicine

and the more recently popular "energy" therapies such as crystal, electrocrystal and colour therapy - the list increases almost daily as new approaches are developed' (**The Complete family guide to alternative medicine: an illustrated encyclopedia of natural healing** / edited by C Norman Shealy (1999), p.10).

Over the last few decades, public awareness has changed substantially towards the dominator model so prevalent in modern medicine and its doctor-as-God image that is now viewed as somewhat tarnished. Today people want more say in their treatment and less reliance on technology for technology's sake. They have become less content to put their bodies, minds and souls in the hands of 'experts' and are more likely to want to know why they become ill and how they can participate in their own healing.

In recent years people have turned to a wide range of alternative models of healing, both to supplement Western medicine and sometimes replace it, thus presenting the potential for taking responsibility for their health and integrating the best conventional and alternative medical treatments into an effective package. Many alternative forms of health care are low tech and low cost and are often more appropriate than the standard conventional medical treatment might be.

Most visits to the family doctor are for stress or anxiety-related illnesses, or for ailments such as colds or flu that will usually get better on their own. This is more a



case of the need for education, emotional support and a helping hand in mobilising the body's own capacity to heal. The patient needs to be heard and encouraged, but instead is most often disappointed due to the constraints of the limited ten-minute visit.

Depending on the nature of the problem, the patient might best be served by a psychotherapist, a bodyworker, a course in stress management, a chiropractor, an acupuncturist, lessons in meditation or creative imagination, or even a support group. These techniques tend to rely on restoring the body's natural balance rather than overwhelming the system with powerful drugs or procedures. Many alternative healing techniques also encourage taking responsibility for our overall well-being and thus promote healthier and more fulfilling lifestyles.

The only danger with alternative medical treatments is that some are un-researched and may not be effective. One of the worst case scenarios is when an alternative treatment precludes a patient from taking advantage of a standard medical procedure that has a better chance of being curative. Therefore caution is needed in evaluating and using the wide range of alternative treatments available.

Desmond Pantanowitz, a local South African doctor, addresses the issue of alternative medicine in a rational, logical and scientific manner in **Alternative medicine: a doctor's perspective** (1994) where he provides a logical overview of the various disciplines. He points out that three quarters of black people in Africa visit traditional healers who exert a profound psychological influence. Some of the herbs they use may even be beneficial, but they cannot be sanctioned by modern medicine without proof of efficacy and safety. There are in fact well-documented cases of sickness and death due to poisoning by traditional healers encountered by doctors. He also points out that because of human fascination with the unknown, the occult and the unexplained, alternative practitioners have a ready and lucrative market waiting to be tapped. Therefore, one should not be surprised at the popularity of alternative medicine when one notices how popular the many other strange activities of mankind are.

If you are looking for alternate choices for your health other than conventional medicine, the choices you have are endless.

A general local title **Reader's Digest South African family guide to natural medicine** offers an informative encyclopedic arrangement of common ailments with relevant entries for treatment both alter-

nate and orthodox. In the American title **Five steps to selecting the best alternative medicine: a guide to complementary & integrative health care**, authors Mary and Michael Morton provide the reader with a commonsense guide to the various alternative health treatments that include useful tips with regard to selecting the best one for one's ailment and how to go about selecting a practitioner. Further reading on alternative treatments and remedies can also be found in the bulky **Alternative medicine: the definitive guide** which offers an alphabetical arrangement of alternative treatments and a separate arrangement of common health conditions and suggested treatments.

Regaining your health through alternative medicine is becoming more and more common today as people find that conventional medicine does not always work. Now let us take a look at a few important examples of alternative treatments.

Chinese medicine and medical practices are very popular among all cultures and has existed for at least 2 000 years. It consists of acupuncture, moxi-combustion and herbal medicine as well as acupressure massage, cupping, therapeutic exercises, and advice on diet and lifestyle. Acupuncture has proven to be effective in the treatment of many medical conditions including cancer, arthritis, weight management, diabetes, heart disease and pregnancy. It is a common form of alternative medicine that is being heard about more often in Western cultures.

The use of a variety of relaxation techniques are another form of alternative medicine that more and more people are using with regard to pain control, the lowering of blood pressure, and for the control of the symptoms of arthritis, headaches and

many other medical conditions. Some of these relaxation techniques include yoga, tai chi, meditation, visualisation, chanting.

Another alternative health method used by many people is managing the chakra system of the body. The chakra points are fully concentrated on until both mental and physical health is obtained. Many times this requires the use of a chakra therapist to help with each level.

Homoeopathic medicine, another favourite, is a natural pharmaceutical science that uses various plants, minerals or animals in a very small dose to stimulate a sick person's natural defenses. It originated in 19th century Germany under its founding father Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843) who argued that treatment of disease should be directed to the vital force, and this would restore the body's harmony and balance.

Stress is the recognised number one killer, not heart disease, nor diabetes or cancer alone, as stress is the major cause for these diseases in the first place. Massage therapy is one excellent way to reduce stress. When we are touched in a caring way, chemicals are released in our brain, producing profound relaxation. Massage techniques have been developed over several millennia, reducing pain, producing relaxation and a feeling of inner peace. There are many kinds of massage and touch therapies, lumped under the category of body work.

This includes disciplines such as reiki, Alexander technique, and the various types of massage techniques.

One must not forget the benefits of reflexology and aromatherapy where essential oils are used for the relief of chronic muscle tension easing the mental and emotional stress that usually accompany



an illness. In recent years there has been a growing interest in this, reminding one of the revolutionary Bach Flower therapy remedies said to help individuals regain access to their spiritual healing forces, thereby strengthening the immune system and overall health. This is thoroughly covered in Mechthild Scheffer's **Encyclopedia of Bach flower therapy**.

Magnet therapy and the appreciation of the power of magnets have a long history, a tradition dating back to the ancient civilisations of Egypt, India and China. Roger Coghill, as Cambridge-trained research biologist covers the subject in **The book of magnet healing** where he reveals useful methods of healing various ailments with magnets and offers practical ideas to diminish the effects of harmful electromagnetic fields in the home.

A new therapy that is gaining popularity in South Africa is LaStone therapy which draws on ancient native American traditions, making use of geo-thermotherapy by placing heated stones and then chilled stones on the body to bring about a chemical release from the body. Titles to read are Jane Scriver's **LaStone therapy** and Mary Nelson's **The official LaStone therapy manual**.

Crystal healing has been with us for thousands of years. But it is not only in complementary therapies that crystals are used. Modern conventional medicine has rubies in its surgical lasers, used for the treatment of gallstones, for example. Silicon chips - manufactured crystals - are a vivid part of pacemakers and other life-saving equipment. Austrian crystal healer Michael Gienger delivers an authoritative account in his book **Crystal power, crystal healing** as does Liz Simpson in **The book of crystal healing**.

During the nineteenth century Father Sebastian Kneipp developed a system of water therapy that is still popular at German spas today. Leading herbalist and health writer Dian Dincin Buchman ably covers various water treatments for ailments from children's ailments to sport injuries in **The complete book of water healing**.

Mind-body therapies are based on the concept that the mind or brain can influence the body's ability to fight disease. Meditation uses deep breathing or other focusing techniques to enable a person to centre his or her thoughts. Meditation may be used to reduce tension, fatigue, or anxiety, and increase resistance to stress. As we know the human mind is an untapped powerhouse of energy, which according to psychic Uri Geller is capable of restoring mental and physical health, more fully described in his book **Mind medicine**. Another classic work is that of New Zealand doctor Frederick Bailes **Your mind can heal you** where the doctor closely observed the mental factors responsible for the recovery of patients.

This is just a briefing and introduction to a subject that can certainly be explored in more depth and readers can certainly do this when consulting the accompanying selected booklist.

In conclusion, Desmond Pantanowitz in his **Alternative medicine: a doctor's perspective** states that alternative techniques do have a place and share common ground with conventional medicine, specifically with regard to a healthy life style. He feels that until there is scientific proof, alternative medicine must continue to be regarded as fringe medicine. This, of course, is his opinion and it is up to the individual to decide in what he or she believes.

There is no denying the important fact that alternative medicine has helped human-kind cope with the twentieth century and hopefully during this new century more will be done to prove it benefits.

