

A natural healing approach to methadone detoxification focusing on the use of herbs by Tom O Brien

Heroin is a highly addictive drug. Withdrawal symptoms can appear if heroin is discontinued or stopped abruptly.¹ Methadone is a synthetic opioid used as a legal substitute for heroin that is as addictive as heroin. Adverse effects of methadone include; constipation, headache, weight gain, perspiration, difficulty urinating, insomnia and impotence. When a heroin addict begins to reduce their methadone dose, they experience withdrawal symptoms that include; anxiety, depression, muscle cramps, insomnia, cold sweats, severe muscle and bone aches, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea.² On top of this heroin addicts tend to come from socio-economically marginalized communities where they generally are at a greater risk to being prescribed psychiatric medications for normal psychological and emotional problems, consume poorer diets, exercise irregularly, consume more alcohol and die younger.³ In this context a natural healing approach to detoxification from methadone/heroin, psychiatric drugs, food and other toxins within the body will involve a gentle program of organ cleansing, nurturing and restoring person to optimal psychological and physical health.

Methadone detoxification

A heroin addict should only be encouraged to undertake a methadone detox, if they are stabilized on their methadone i.e. no longer using heroin and have the support of their prescribing doctor and other professionals. A tapered methadone detox is recommended e.g. 10ml reduction per month. That means if a person is on a high dose of 90mls, they could be gradually detoxed over 9 to 12 months.

Once the detox has begun, the patient is supported to reflect on the underlying causes of their addiction and find new and more natural ways to manage life's challenges. As well as psychological therapies, the patient should be encouraged to engage in art therapy, creative writing and self-help support groups, to enable them to develop emotional and psychological awareness.⁴ This will help to

reduce their dependence on psychiatric medication and support their methadone detox. In consultation with their prescribing doctor a medication detox can be agreed.

Natural healing methods can then be used to support and sustain the person on the path to recovery and healing. At a psychological level there are a number of herbs and natural healing methods that can be used to support the bodies natural healing process and help the person deal with the painful side effects of detox from opiates and other psychological medications. St. Johns Wort is currently a widely used anti-depressant in Europe. Despite different methods, herbal preparations, and dosages, St. John's wort appeared more effective than placebo.⁵ Kava Kava has an anti-anxiety effect and can be used with St. John's wort to enhance its effectiveness.⁶ Valerian is a muscle relaxant, sedative and nerve restorant. It is very helpful during the withdrawal period because it calms and relieves anxiety, restlessness, hysteria, insomnia and stress.⁷ Lemon balm helps calm the spirit and makes withdrawal easier. It's also a mild antidepressant.⁸ Aniseed elevates blood sugar levels naturally, reducing sugar-based craving for drugs and alcohol. It also builds chi and energy.⁹

As well as supporting emotional and psychological healing, the patient will need to evaluate their lifestyle and diet, make gradual changes and embark on an organ-by-organ cleanse and detox routine. Organ cleansing and detox begins with the lower bowel. Heroin and methadone shuts down and damages the digestive system.¹⁰ Our health and vitality depends to a large degree on how well our digestive system functions. Most of the digestive problems that commonly occur are easily avoidable by changes of lifestyle and eating habits. Herbs that help the lower bowel to cleanse include; Cascara Sagrada Bark, Barberry Bark, Cayenne Pepper, Ginger Root, Lobelia Herb, Turkey Rhubarb Root, Fennel Seed and Goldenseal Root.¹¹

After cleansing the bowel the focus shifts to the urinary tract using a combination of herbs including; Cayenne Pepper, Ginger Root, Golden Seal Root,

Gravel Root, Juniper Berry, Marshmallow Root, Parsley Root, Uva Ursi Leaf and Eleuthero Root.¹²

The liver is the largest organ of the human body. It plays a vital part in the digestive process. The liver is involved in the detoxification of drugs and plays a vital part in maintaining health. Drug addiction inflicts a lot of damage on the liver. With care the liver has the capacity to regenerate itself. Giving up caffeine, alcohol, sugar, meat, fried foods, salt and processed foods will allow the liver to regenerate. A liver and gall bladder cleanse will use a combination of the following herbs; Barberry Bark, Wild Yam Root, Cramp Bark, Fennel Seed, Ginger Root, Catnip Herb and Peppermint Leaf.¹³

Other herbs that help support liver function include Milk Thistle Seed, which has antidepressant and antioxidant effects that accelerates protein synthesis by the liver cells, increases immune response, eradicates infection and soothes inflamed tissue.¹⁴ Blue Vervain improves liver function and acts as a nerve restorative. It can be used to treat a variety of conditions, including anxiety, cirrhosis, depression, headache, hepatitis, hysteria, insomnia, pain and stress.¹⁵ Burdock has alternative nutritive and rejuvenate properties. It cleanses the liver and blood of drug residues and can be used to calm both anger and pain. It also improves the function of all the organs of elimination and improves the metabolism of fats.¹⁶

The vast majority of people with addictions or in recovery don't get enough sleep. Getting enough good quality sleep is vital for the body's organs to replenish and maintain good health. The use of sleeping pills is widespread among methadone patients. There is plenty of evidence that sleeping pills cause major harm.¹⁷ Many herbs have sleep inducing properties. Best known is valerian. Others include chamomile, passionflower, lavender, hops and lemon balm.

Conclusion

Leavitt¹⁸ argues that the real drug abuser is the pharmaceutical industry. Our over dependence on medical solutions for everything is making us sicker. Illich¹⁹

used the term iatrogenesis to describe how orthodox medicine was not contributing to the causes of disease. It is now more than ten years since the introduction of methadone as a response to the heroin epidemic. Today the problem is even greater. It is time to rethink our basic assumptions about heroin addiction and its treatment.²⁰ I believe natural healing and herbal medicine can make a significant contribution towards a sustainable response to the problem of heroin addiction.

¹ Doweiko H. Concepts of Chemical Dependency. California: Brooks/Cole; 2002.

² The Methadone Handbook. London: Mental Health National Trust; 1993.

³ Overview of Drug Issues In Ireland. Dublin: Health Research Board; 1997.

⁴ Waller D, Mahony J. Treatment of Addiction. London: Routledge; 1999.

⁵ Hammerness P, Basch E, Ulbricht C, Barrette D, Foppa I, Basch S, Bent S, Boon H, and Ernst E. St. John's Wort: A Systematic Review of Adverse Effects and Drug Interactions for the Consultation Psychiatrist. Psychosomatics, Aug 2003; 44: 271 - 282.

^{6,9} Hoffmann D. Holistic Herbal. Great Britain: Element Books Limited; 1983.

¹⁰ McInTosh J, Mckeganey N. Beating the Dragon. Essex: Pearson Education Limited; 2002.

¹¹⁻¹³ Christopher J. School of Natural Healing. Utah: Christopher Publications; 1976.

¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Mars B. Addiction Free Naturally. Rochester: Healing Arts Press; 2001.

¹⁷ Dalrymple T. Junk Medicine. Hampshire: Harriman House Limited; 2007.

¹⁸ Leavitt F. The Real Drug Abusers. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

¹⁹ Illich I. Medical Nemesis. London: Penguin; 1976.

²⁰ O'Brien T. Is there a way out of this clinic? The Adult Learner. 2007; 40-55.