Depression: How to Offer Care and Support in the Spa

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Over the years the Journal for Clinical Psychiatry has tracked the effects of depression in the United States. Rated as the eleventh cause of preventable diseases leading to death, depression plays a major role in substance abuse, suicide, and low productivity, increased sick days and absenteeism in the workplace. Not only does depression effect the person experiencing it from within, but caregiver burnout also factors into the over 100 billion dollars depression costs the US economy annually. So serious is depression considered within the healthcare system and the insurance companies underwriting, that –for instance – if one wishes to take out travelers insurance when going abroad, one will find that whereas, by comparison whereas a history of being treated for anxiety may increase your travel insurance premium by $100, the coverage for persons who truthfully fill out forms to indicate that they are medicated for or have been hospitalized for depression will see their travel insurance rate skyrocket.

Although there are many causes for depression, Ayurveda, the science of longevity from the east explains that one of the primary causes for depression is a disturbance in the body energy known as VATA; sometimes explained as the wind energy of the body. VATA is responsible for the healthy functioning of our central nervous system (CNS) and shows itself most noticeably in the ease or difficulty we find in movement – including the health of our joints – and the health of our lower GI tract, or colon. What disturbs the healthy functioning of these expressions and manifestations of Vata can arise from environmental, behavioral, circumstantial, and nutritional causes. If we are exposed to noxious chemicals in our air in water, if we find ourselves moving from one climate to the next, or if we find ourselves in the midst of a natural disaster and radical change in our home or regional environment, all of these disturb Vata. If we are constantly traveling, changing where we are and what we are doing, if we create a lifestyle where there is no proper time to eat, rest, take care of our nurture our bodies, or get enough sleep, all of these disturb Vata. If our diet is low in nutrition and does not appropriately supply the nutrients we need to fulfill our daily activities, Vata gets disturbed. What does disturbed Vata look like? A body that can’t rest, but may be exhausted, a mind that cannot focus or is so focused to the point of obsession. Biologically and psychologically run down and out of balance, we increasingly feel more self doubt. To mask our self doubt, we may act as if we just don’t care – about ourselves or others. And what we get attracted to nutritionally only exacerbates the problem; caffeine, alcohol, sugar. And when none of these work – which sooner or later one may or may not notice, medication becomes the only logical solution. The simple truth – and it is an Ayurvedic one - is that when we are out of balance, we get attracted to those things which amplify our imbalance. I call it the lemming law of oriental medicine.

If we have enough insight, perhaps we can figure this out and begin to unwind a life that has gone awry. But more often than not, help and/or support from others becomes an important part of what it takes to overcome feelings of depression and the lifestyle that contributes to it. And, what spas do and what they of the teach or espouse can be the very support that is needed.

An article that is as short and succinct can only touch upon a few things that can be done to help address this national problem; a problem that we ourselves may be experiencing and certainly note in the clients who walk into our doors every day.

That said, there are three things I would like to offer here.

First, body work. Receiving nourishing touch from skilled hands that is calm, deliberate, warm and uses products that nourish and do not add to the chemical burden the client may be experiencing all calms Vata. In Ayurveda, there is the treatment known as Abhyanga, which in one translation means “loving hands,” is extremely effective. If you do not have someone on your staff that knows Abhyanga, offer your client a gentle Swedish-style massage. This type of body work is recommended more than treatments like Thai, deep tissue, or Shiatsu massage. Another Ayurvedic treatment that is highly effective for depression is shirodhara, the playing of oil on the middle of the forehead. This helps to release serotonin, allowing the body to rest, nourishing and calming our nervous system.

Second, if you offer clients food as part of your service, warm teas and soups are far better than juices and raw foods. In general, recommend a diet that is warm, nourishing, taken at regular times in the day. The diet should be mineral and enzyme rich. It is often the case that people go for the caffeine and sugar because their diets are depleted in these vital nutrients.

Lastly, there is meditation. There are many forms of meditation. Meditation is not about blanking out the mind. Working with breath, visualization, or age-old sacred sounds from traditions around the world, meditation encourages a peaceful, more spacious state of mind. Depression can feel so solid and claustrophobic. By contrast and by function, meditation is an important antidote for such constricted, often seemingly intractable thinking and feeling.

We live in unpredictable times. The political, economic, and ecological landscapes are changing rapidly. It is only logical to go through times of feeling out of balance, anxious, and depressed. Some of these life situations we can change. Others we cannot. Regardless, to reduce the impact of these conditions and their resultant feelings on our body and mind, taking to heart and practically applying the skills and tools that are the foundation of spas and what they offer is essential.

As such, these words are not just for or about our clients.

We know that.