

Complementary and alternative treatments for mental health

Some people with mental health problems find it helps to use complementary and alternative therapies. This factsheet explains what they are, and how you can access them. This information is for people affected by mental illness in England who are 18 or over. And their carers, relatives and friends.

Key Points.

- Complementary and alternative therapies are health-related therapies that aren't part of mainstream medical care.
- They aim to increase wellbeing, aid relaxation, and promote good mental health.
- Complementary and alternative therapies can be used to help mental health problems. But there generally isn't much good evidence to say they work.
- But many people who use complementary and alternative therapies find them helpful. Everyone is different, and the important thing is what works for you.
- Not all therapies are regulated. It's important to make sure the therapist you choose is suitably qualified.

This factsheet covers:

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

1. What are complementary and alternative therapies?

Complementary and alternative therapies aren't 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. But people also use them on their own. You may hear them being called 'holistic treatments'.

Different complementary and alternative therapies may help with different symptoms or general wellbeing. They can focus on your physical, mental, or spiritual wellbeing.

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2. Can complementary and alternative therapies be used to help mental health problems?²

Complementary and alternative therapies can be used to help mental health problems. But the Royal College of Psychiatrists say there isn't much good evidence to say they work. Some studies are too small to be reliable.

But many people who use complementary and alternative therapies find them helpful. Everyone is different, and the important thing is what works for you.

Before using complementary and alternative therapies it's a good idea speak to your GP or psychiatrist, especially if:

- you're taking other medication or using other treatments,
- you're pregnant or breastfeeding, or
- you're under 18 years old.

Some complementary and alternative therapies aren't allowed in some sports. So, if you're a sportsperson you might want to check this before using them.

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

There are lots of different complementary and alternative therapies. Below is a list of the ones we talk about in this factsheet.

- Acupuncture
- Aromatherapy
- Herbal medicine
- Homeopathy
- Hypnotherapy
- Light therapy
- Massage
- Meditation

- Pet therapy
- Spiritual or 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. Practitioners believe the needles can help to start the healing process in your body.³

Some acupuncture practitioners say it can be used to treat mental health conditions. There is some research into its uses for depression, schizophrenia, and insomnia. But there isn't much scientific evidence to prove that acupuncture is good for treating mental health conditions.^{4,5}

You can read more about acupuncture from the NHS here:
www.nhs.uk/conditions/acupuncture

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy uses essential oils to improve health and wellbeing.⁶ Essential oils are plant extracts.

You can use aromatherapy oils through massage, in the bath, or by breathing them in. Research has shown that aromatherapy may be useful to treat symptoms of depression.⁷ There is some research to show that aromatherapy may reduce anxiety and stress. But these studies are based on small numbers so more research is needed.^{8,9,10}

You can read more about aromatherapy here:
www.aromatherapycouncil.org.uk/treatments

Emotional freedom technique¹¹

Emotional freedom technique is like acupuncture but without the needles. It involves tapping with your fingertips on acupuncture points on the hands, face and upper body. You do this while focusing on issues you want to resolve. A therapist helps you do this.

You repeat positive phrases to help develop a more positive outlook. Once you learn the technique you can use it on your own.

It's used to help:

- relieve stress and promote general relaxation,
- deal with emotions like anxiety, sadness, anger, guilt, frustration,
- physical pain,
- relieve phobias and other fears,
- sleep issues, and
- increase self-esteem and positive feelings.

Some see this technique as a crossover between talking therapy and complimentary therapy approaches. There is some evidence that shows the effectiveness of this technique.

Herbal remedies

Herbal remedies are made from plants. Sometimes they are called herbal medicines. Many mainstream drugs and medicines are based on products that come from plants.¹²

You can get herbal remedies in different forms, such as liquid, powder, or cream. A qualified herbalist can prescribe herbal remedies to use alongside other medications and treatment.

When you're buying a herbal remedy, check that it has one of the following on the packet:

- a Traditional Herbal Registration (THR) number, or
- a product licence (PL) number.

A PL number means that medical trials have shown that the remedy works. A THR number is for products where there is less evidence they work. But the THR number shows that they:¹³

- are safe for most people to take,
- contain the right ingredient at the right dose, and
- although it hasn't been proved they work, pharmacists think that they could work.

Some herbal remedies can have a bad effect on a condition that you have, or on medication that you take. These are called interactions. You should always talk to your doctor or a pharmacist before taking herbal remedies.

The table below lists some of the common herbal remedies used for treating mental health conditions. And common interactions with other medicines and other frequently used substances.

Name	Uses	Interactions ¹⁴
St John's wort ¹⁵	Depression	Antidepressants, strong painkillers, the contraceptive pill, some cancer drugs, some epilepsy drugs, digoxin, HIV medicines and some blood thinning medicines.
Valerian ¹⁶	Anxiety	Sedatives, alcohol, the contraceptive pill, HIV medicines, cancer treatments, epilepsy medicines, anti-fungal treatments, blood thinning medicines.
Passionflower ¹⁷	Anxiety, nervous tension, as a	Some blood thinning medicines.

	mild sedative	
Bach Flower Remedies ¹⁸	Anxiety, panic, trauma	Not known.
Roseroot / Rhodiola ¹⁹	Anxiety, tiredness, improving concentration and memory	None reported.
Sage ^{20,21,22}	Depression and anxiety, improving memory	Blood thinning drugs such as aspirin, ibuprofen and warfarin, antidepressants and anticonvulsants.
Camomile ²³	As a mild sedative	Blood thinning drugs and the contraceptive pill.

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.²⁴

Organisations such as the Faculty of Homeopathy and the Society of Homeopaths say that homeopathy is effective. They include evidence on their websites.^{25 26}

But the NHS say:

- there's been lots of investigations into how effective homeopathy is, and
- there's no good-quality evidence that it's effective as a treatment for any health condition.

Homeopathy isn't widely available on the NHS. In 2017, NHS England recommended that GPs and other prescribers should stop providing it.²⁷

Hypnotherapy²⁸

Hypnotherapy involves a therapist guiding you into a deeply relaxed or trance like state.

Before therapy begins you will agree a goal you want to achieve, and the therapist will make suggestions while you're hypnotised to help this happen.

You should be fully in control while hypnotised and can bring yourself out of hypnosis if you need to.

It's important you don't use this therapy if you:

- experience psychosis, or
- live with some types of personality disorder.

It can make these conditions worse.

If you live with a personality disorder check with your GP first.

Hypnotherapy isn't usually available on the NHS. But you can find out if it's available from them in your area by asking your GP.

When looking for a private therapist it's important you choose someone who's registered with a professional body. The body should be accredited by the Professional Standards Authority. You can expect to pay £50 upwards to see a hypnotherapist privately.

You can read more about hypnotherapy from the NHS here:

www.nhs.uk/conditions/hypnotherapy

Light therapy²⁹

Light therapy has been found by some people to help if you experience seasonal affective disorder (SAD). Although NICE guidelines say it's unclear if it works.

Light therapy involves the users exposing themselves to light through a light box or lamp. The light source replaces the light that the user doesn't get in the winter months.

Light therapy is thought to work by:

- increasing the production of serotonin, a feel-good hormone, and
- decreasing the production of melatonin, a hormone that encourages sleep.

Most people can use light therapy without suffering any harm. But it may not be suitable if you're:

- taking St John's wort,
- taking certain antibiotics or antipsychotics, or
- have an eye condition or eye damage that makes you sensitive to light.

It's important to use a light box that is medically approved for SAD treatment. The box or lamp should also be produced by a fully certified manufacturer.

You can read more about treatment for seasonal affective disorder from the NHS here: www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad/treatment

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.³⁰ Using long kneading strokes, rhythmic light tapping strokes, and movement of the joints to relax muscles and relieve tension.
- Shiatsu massage.³¹ Pressure is put on certain points to help balance your energy.

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.³²

An example of mindfulness 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 therapy (MBCT) is a combination of mindfulness and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

The National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends MBCT to help people with a history of depression.³³

A course of MBCT should last for 8 weeks. You will usually have MBCT 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.³⁴

You can also get mindfulness courses through:

- self-help guides,
- books,
- mobile apps,
- podcasts, or
- YouTube videos.

There may also be classes in your local area.

You can get more information about mindfulness here:
www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started/

You can find out more information about CBT 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 the factsheet.

Spiritual and energy healing

Spiritual or energy healers believe that energy in your body affects your mental and physical health.

Reiki is a well-known energy healing therapy. A therapist puts their hands on, or above, your body in certain places. They believe that they can channel energy into you to help healing.³⁵ You keep your clothes on while they do this. You can sit or lie down.

There isn't much research into the effects of Reiki on mental health. But research has shown that it may help with symptoms of depression.³⁶ It may also help feelings of stress or anxiety and insomnia.³⁷

Some people from African, Asian and Caribbean communities use spirit-based indigenous healing practices to help physical and mental health. These practices can include voodoo, shango and orisha. You can read more about them here: www.bacp.co.uk/bacp-journals/therapy-today/2013/july-2013/spirit-based-healing-in-the-black-diaspora

Pet therapy³⁸

There's some evidence to suggest that having a pet may help people who live with mental health conditions.

Pets can provide reliable, close relationships. This could be important if you have limited or difficult relationships with other members of your social circle.

Pets can help you manage feelings through distraction from symptoms and negative experiences.

Pets can also encourage you to be physically active and to get outdoors more. This can be beneficial for mental health.

Yoga

Yoga focuses on breathing techniques, strength, and flexibility to improve your mental and physical wellbeing. There is some evidence that yoga can help to reduce depression and stress.³⁹

You may be able to find yoga classes at your local community centre or at your local gym.

You can read more about yoga and find a teacher near you on the following websites:

- Society of Yoga Practitioners: www.tsyp.yoga
- The British Wheel of Yoga: www.bwy.org.uk

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4. Where can I get complementary and alternative therapies?

The NHS doesn't usually offer complementary and alternative therapies. You may be able to get complementary and alternative therapies through:

- private therapists or practitioners,
- health spas,
- charities, or
- alternative therapy centres.

How do I choose a practitioner or therapist?

Complementary therapists don't have to register with a professional body to treat people.

But you can check if a private therapist is registered with a professional body, like the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC). The CNHC was set up by the government, and they're accountable to parliament.

Therapists registered with the CNHC have to stick to codes of conduct, ethics, and performance. There is also a standard complaints procedure you can follow if you're not happy with how you've been treated.⁴⁰

Many types of therapies 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 in the [Useful contacts](#) section at the end of this factsheet.

You can think about the following things when you choose a therapist.

- Compare the cost of therapies, and make sure you aren't being over-charged.
- Ask the therapist about their qualifications, membership of a professional body, and how long they have been practising.
- Always make sure they have 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 by researching the therapy.
- Ask the therapist about how the treatment works and whether it could have any negative effects.
- No reliable therapist should claim to be able to cure severe mental illness.

Ask your GP or psychiatrist for their advice. They can advise you:

- whether the treatment could affect your medication, and
- about any good or bad effects the therapy might have on your condition.

How much do complementary and alternative therapies cost?

Private therapists charge different prices for different therapies. You can compare the costs of therapists and make sure you aren't being over-charged.

You can search on the internet or ask your GP if a therapy is available in your area.

You may be able to get low cost or free complementary and alternative therapies. But this is unusual. You can search on the internet to see what is available in your area.

Further Reading

Useful Contacts

Complementary and alternative medicine

The NHS has information on their website about complementary and alternative therapies.

Website: www.nhs.uk/conditions/complementary-and-alternative-medicine

BAATN - The Black, African and Asian Therapy Network

Search for counsellors, psychotherapists, psychologists and complementary therapists of Black, African, South Asian and Caribbean Heritage. BAATN supports people of these backgrounds but are open to other people of colour who are affected by prejudice.

Email: administrator@baatn.org.uk

Website: www.baatn.org.uk

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council

This is an independent regulatory body set up by the government. They set professional standards and a code of ethics that complementary therapists have to follow. They keep an independent register of qualified therapists and can investigate complaints.

Telephone: 020 3327 2720

Address: CNHC, PO Box 428, Bristol BS9 0FB

Email: info@cnhc.org.uk

Website: www.cnhc.org.uk

The Association of Natural Medicine (ANM)

The ANM is a membership body for complementary therapists. Registered therapists must show the ANM that they have the right qualifications and experience to be a therapist. They also run training for therapists.

Telephone 07596 427084

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

Email: a-nm@hotmail.co.uk

Website: www.associationnaturalmedicine.co.uk

Association of Reflexologists (AoR)

This is a membership body for reflexologists. To be a member, therapists must show they have the right qualifications and experience to practice.

Telephone: 01823 351010

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

Email: info@aor.org.uk

Website: www.aor.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 Jedd 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:** British Complementary Medicine Association, 27 Old Gloucester Street, London WC1N 3AX**Email:** office@bcma.co.uk**Website:** www.bcma.co.uk**Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council**

This is an independent regulatory body set up by the government. They set professional standards and a code of ethics that complementary therapists have to follow. They keep an independent register of qualified therapists and can investigate complaints.

Telephone: 020 3327 2720**Address:** CNHC, PO Box 428, Bristol BS9 0FB**Email:** info@cnhc.org.uk**Website:** www.cnhc.org.uk**Complementary Medical Association**

This is an international association for complementary therapists. They promote ethical, responsible and professional complementary medicine.

Telephone: 0800 841 1066**Email:** via form on website: www.the-cma.org.uk/contact-us**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: 07718 479 416**Address:** Room 4.11, 83 Baker Street, Marylebone, London W1U 6AG**Email:** info@ctha.com**Website:** www.ctha.com

Federation of Holistic Therapists

A professional membership association for therapists in the UK and Ireland. Therapies include sports and remedial therapies, complementary healthcare, and holistic beauty treatments. Therapists must hold recognised qualifications to register.

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. You can search for practitioners.

Address: 20-22 Wenlock Road, London N1 7GU

Email via website: www.shiatsusociety.org/form/contact

Website: www.shiatsusociety.org

UK Reiki Federation

They are a UK professional body representing Reiki practitioners. You can search for a practitioner in your area.

Telephone: 0203 745 9746

Address: UK Reiki Federation, 9 Barnfield Close, Old Coulsdon, Surrey CR5 1QR

Email: enquiry@reikifed.co.uk

Website: www.reikifed.co.uk

EFT International

EFT International is a unique, not-for-profit global association and charity of emotional freedom technique practitioners, trainers and students.

Address: John Greenway Building, John Greenway Close, Tiverton, Devon EX16 6QF

Email via the website: <https://eftinternational.org/about-us/contact-us>

Website: <https://eftinternational.org>

The Alliance of Registered Homeopaths (ARH)

An organisation of qualified homeopaths which has a Code of Ethics and Practice

Telephone: 01825 714506

Address: Millbrook, Millbrook Hill, Nutley, Uckfield, TN22 3PJ

Email: info@a-r-h.org

Website: www.a-r-h.org

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This factsheet is available in large print.

Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0808 801 0525

**Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm
(excluding bank holidays)**

Email: feedback@rethink.org

Did this help?

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Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on: 0808 801 0525 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.

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