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Depressive disorders—anthroposophical insight and treatment using anthroposophical medicines and external applications

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How do antidepressants affect essential human nature?

■ Abstract

Depressive disorders are the most common psychiatric conditions. A first insight based on the anthroposophical view of the human being leads to a typological study of the psychosomatic constitution—hysteria and neurasthenia. In the hysterical type, the upper does not fully control the lower human being; in the neurasthenic type, the powers of the upper human being prove too destructive. Clinical differentiation between the two types is based on a differentiated symptomatology in body and soul. Anthroposophical medicines and external applications achieve a degree of balance for one-sided constitutions and thus indirectly a reduction in symptoms. Deeper causes for depressive disorders are found in the “organ-development disorders” of the lower human being, especially in lung, liver, kidney and heart. These are functional disorders in the sphere of etheric powers of growth and development which lead to pathological symptoms in body and above all in soul. Specific treatment with anthroposophical medicines and external applications thus first addresses the bodily causes of depressive disorders.

■ Keywords

Depressive disorders
Upper and lower human being
Hysterical and neurasthenic constitutions
Anthroposophical medicines
External applications
Functional organ diagnosis
Disorders in development of lung, liver kidney, heart
Constitutional treatment
Individualized treatment

The incidence of depressive conditions has risen considerably in recent decades in all western civilized nations. They present a particular challenge not only to psychiatrists but in all medical disciplines.

In the diagnosis, distinction may be made between depressive changes accompanying numerous other physical and mental disorders, and depressive disorders in the narrower sense. In the latter case these are

- bipolar affective disorder (ICD-10 F 31)
- depressive episode (ICD-10 F 32)
- recurrent depressive disorder (ICD-10 F 33)
- dysthymia (ICD-10 F 34.1)
- adjustment disorders: short or longer-term depressive reaction, anxiety and depressive disorder mixed (ICD-10 F 43.2)

Depressive disorders in the narrower sense cannot be considered to be a uniform pathology. They vary widely, with many different causes, degrees of severity and evolutions. This means that explanations based on the anthroposophical view of the human being also cannot be uniform. One can only describe general pathological processes which present differently in every situation and have individual character.

A first insight comes with the distinction which Rudolf Steiner made between two constitutional types—the hysterical and the neurasthenic constitution (1).

Apart from this, deeper causes may be found in the functional metabolic disorders of the lower human being, referred to as “disorders in organ development” in lung, liver, kidney, heart and possibly also other organs (3, 5).

Treatment in anthroposophical medicine will ultimately also have to be individual. The road to this does, however, take us first to a typology of disease and constitution and also to typical medicines and methods of treatment. In this respect not every medicine or method can be highly specific, but requires a first orientation according to typological criteria. Practical experience in similar cases will always provide valuable support and ideas. The suggestions offered below are intended to be just that. They can help with the first steps in therapeutic work, though there can be no claim for completeness.

Meaningful treatment of depressive disorders will, of course, always be comprehensive, considering other el-

ements as well as anthroposophic medicines and external applications:

- psychotropic drugs
- movement therapy (eurythmy therapy, gymnastics, dance therapy, other forms of movement therapy with natural movement of all kinds)
- art therapy (sculpture and modelling, painting, music, developed speech)
- work therapy
- talks and psychotherapy
- social help of all kinds
- self-help groups
- spiritual and religious care

1. Hysterical and neurasthenic constitutions

At the beginning of the 20th century, hysteria and neurasthenia were familiar terms in psychiatry, referring to two specific syndromes. The terms are no longer used to refer to disease entities in modern psychiatric nomenclature.

Steiner used these terms for two types of constitution, speaking of them in his first medical course to introduce his medical approach to the human being. He spoke of a “hysterical” and a “neurasthenic” constitution, two types of constitution with typical morbid tendencies in body and soul that call for typical methods of treatment (1, 2).

The description of the two constitutional types does not primarily take its orientation in external anatomical phenomena of the human form but considers the inner functional aspect of the etheric powers of growth and development. These are the powers that maintain and constitute life in the human organism. The inner functional aspect consists in two energy centres that are polar opposites and maintain dynamic tension between them. One is in the “upper human being”, the other in the “lower human being”.

The processes and powers in the upper human being have their centre in the head region and form the basis for conscious awareness processes of all kinds, i.e. perception through the sense organs, the forming of ideas, concepts and thinking processes, and ultimately maintaining a state of waking consciousness. The lung’s breathing activity is also seen as belonging to this. The processes in the upper human being inevitably lead to the degradation of organic substance which must then be eliminated or it will contribute to hardening and sclerotic tendencies. The result is premature tiredness and ageing. The inner life and the intensity of conscious awareness are strengthened by the functions of the upper human being.

The processes and powers in the lower human being have their centre in the abdominal region and take care of the digestion and assimilation of food and further metabolic processes in all tissues, so that the body builds up its own substance. They provide the basis for growth, energy conversion, the generation of heat, and reproductive processes. These processes of purely vegetative or autonomous life are completely unconscious. The func-

tions of the lower human being reduce or extinguish conscious awareness.

The two centres functioning as polar opposites are like image and negative counter image. The dynamic balance between them is maintained in the rhythmical action of the heart and the movement of the blood. Predominance of the lower processes may lead to tachycardia, for instance, predominance of upper processes to bradycardia. The constructive processes of the lower human being predominate in children and young people, with conscious awareness slowly developing. The involitional processes and sclerotic tendencies of the upper human being predominate in older and old people, on the other hand, at the same time enhancing soul and spiritual functions. The dynamic balance between the powers of the upper and lower human being must constantly be maintained individually and varies a great deal from person to person. It may be subject to a constitutional, i.e. innate, shift in one of two directions. Predominance of the powers of the upper human being results in a “neurasthenic” constitution, those of the lower human being to a “hysterical” constitution.

With the hysterical constitution, the processes and powers of the lower human being predominate because the upper human being is relatively weak and cannot maintain the balance. Metabolic processes from the lower human being emancipate, losing form and cohesion, and lead to a disposition for organic disease in the lower human being and weaken the soul’s ability to take hold consciously of personality or individual nature. “Let us assume that the internal chemical or also organic forces of ingested food preponderate in the lower sphere, that is, in food uptake and the digestive apparatus in the wider sense. In a healthy organism the situation must be that all the forces active in the foods themselves, immanent in them, forces, therefore, which we investigate in food laboratories, have been overcome by the upper principle, that they are not at all available for inner activity in the organism, that nothing at all happens there by way of external chemistry, external dynamics and the like, but that all of this has been completely overcome. But it can happen that the upper principle is not meeting the situation adequately to work fully through the lower principle, cooking it all the way through, as it were, or I might also say, etherizing it fully; then a process predominates in the human organism which does not actually belong to it, a process which otherwise takes place in the outside world and should not take place in the human organism. To use a common term, referring merely, I’d say, to certain forms of this irregularity, we have to choose the term “hysteria”. Let us take the term hysteria—we shall see later on that it is not a bad choice—for the situation where metabolic processes emancipate to a great extent. The phenomena which are actually hysterical in the narrower sense are really nothing but a process of taking this irregular metabolism to its culmination.” (1)

With a neurasthenic constitution, the processes and powers of the upper human being predominate, being

Table 1

Hysterical	Neurasthenic
<i>1) Development and prior diseases</i>	
mental development slowed down	accelerated cognitive development
dreamy as a child	too wide awake, cognitively precocious
imaginative	rational, emphasis on thinking
enuresis	out of nappies/diapers early
stayed too young in body and soul	prematurely aged in body and soul
<i>2) Autonomic functions</i>	
tendency to have diarrhoea	tendency to spastic constipation
flatus	lacks appetite
certain foods difficult to digest	
atonic constipation	
periods too heavy and prolonged	periods too weak
damp, rosy skin	dry, pale, flaccid skin, excessive form
tends to sweat	does not sweat much
exhales too strongly	inhales too strongly
appears vital, but quickly exhausted	vitality fragile
dysplastic physiognomy	physiognomy formed out to excess
<i>3) Mind and powers of soul</i>	
tends to be far-sighted	tends to be short-sighted
eye and attention extroverted	eye and attention introverted
marked, instinctive imitation	mind going round and round, broody
of external events	
thinking shows little structure	thinking highly structured
sensory perception of external	not very perceptive of
phenomena strong	external phenomena
not well contained	very contained
intense expression of feelings	holds back expression of feelings
and emotions	and emotions
hyperactive with no clear direction	hesitant, does not take action easily
difficulty waking up in mornings	difficulties going to sleep, twitching
<i>4) Pathological tendencies physically</i>	
inflammatory conditions affecting	inflammatory conditions affecting
abdominal organs	throat and organs of head
myoma	neuralgia
<i>5) Pathological tendencies mentally</i>	
histrionic behaviour	pedantic anancastic behaviour
dissociative experiences	hypochondria
conversion symptoms	pain syndromes

too active in and laying excessive claim to the organs of the upper human being, which leads to increased destructive processes in these organs (tendency to diseases affecting throat and head) and hence intensification of activities in soul and spirit. At the same time the powers of the upper human being are not sufficiently mediated downwards by the heart. "But the same irregularity in interaction can also develop if the upper process is not going right, proceeding in such a way in itself that it demands too much of the upper organization. This is the opposite to the lower processes, the negative, as it were, with too much demanded of the upper process-

es. It comes to a stop, as it were, before it mediates itself via the heart to be with the lower organization. It is too spiritual, therefore, too intellectual organically, if I may put it like this. Then the other pole of these irregularities appears—neurasthenia ... With neurasthenia we thus have the upper principle functioning in a way where the organs of the upper human being have too much demanded of them, so that the functions which really need to be mediated, via the heart, from above take place in the upper human being instead, are already done there, so that the activity does not go down, mediated by being held up in the heart, into the lower stream." (1)

We establish the prevalence of one of the two constitutional types by looking at several of the symptoms listed below together. The more symptoms speak for the one or other constitution, the more marked and one-sided must we consider that constitution to be (*Table 1*).

2. Treatment

If hysterical or neurasthenic symptoms are to the fore with depressive disorder, it is sensible to start with constitutional treatment. This will usually stabilize and relieve the general constitution in body and soul and thus indirectly reduce the symptoms of depression.

2.1 Hysterical constitution

Bitters

- Absinthium D1 dil.¹
 - Amara drops
 - Anagallis D1 dil.
 - Gentiana lutea D1 dil.
 - Gentiana lutea Rh 5 % dil.
 - Gentiana Stomach pilules
- stimulating perception and digestion of foods.

Plumbum met. prep. D6 trit.

- if not sufficiently contained in sensory experiences, identifying too strongly with colours, sounds, etc.
- if not sufficiently contained emotionally and in feelings

Use for 4 weeks

Minium D6 trit.

- tendency to become addicted
- esp. alcohol

Use for 4 weeks at most, not more than 3 months.

Plumbum silicicum D6 trit.

Similar to Plumbum D6, but more effective if physical constitution is delicate or if Plumbum D6 aggravates depressive symptoms; above all suitable for long-term treatment.

Use for 4 weeks at most, not more than 3 months, then 4 weeks" break, and another 3 months.

Antimonite D6 trit. or s.c., in exceptional cases also i.v. For dissociative symptoms and short-term psychotic symptoms.

Use for 4 weeks, then a week's break, another 4 weeks, etc.

May require initial i.v. exhibition, then change to s.c. or oral.

Stibium met. prep. D6 trit., sc. or i.v.

If soul not adequately structured and contained, possibly also with dissociative and psychotic symptoms.

Note

1) The German notation for decimal potencies is D (e.g. D6, which would be the English 6x). Tr.

Use for at least 4 weeks, then a week's break, etc.

Gencydo 1 %, 3 %, 5 % s.c.

- for signs of overflowing fluid organism, poss. also with tendency to hayfever; tumid, watery constitution combined with tendency for dissociative symptoms
- when sensation of pain in skin is reduced
- suitable both for acute intervention in hysteriform and dissociative states and for longer-term constitutional treatment.

Use s.c. injection, starting with 1 % daily, between the shoulder blades or in the calf; later going up to 3 or 5 % depending on tolerance.

Bryophyllum D1 dil.,
Bryophyllum 50 % trit.

for anxious restlessness and panic
Use for 4 weeks initially, then break.

Quartz D10 trit.

if skin and constitution in the upper human being are not fully structured, and lack of containment against the world
Use long-term, e.g. for 6 months.

Teas

Herbal teas containing bitter principles are particularly suitable, e.g. yarrow, wormwood and others.

Baths

not indicated if symptoms markedly hysterical, only with secondary neurasthenic symptomatology.

Arnica essence baths

if trauma in history.

Footbaths

- mustard footbaths
- lavender footbaths

Compress

Mustard compress on calves

2.2 Neurasthenic constitution

Bitters

To stimulate appetite and digestion

- Absinthium D1 dil.
- Abrotanum D1 dil.
- Amara drops
- Anagallis D1 dil.
- Gentiana lutea D1 dil.
- Gentiana lutea Rh 5 % dil.
- Gentiana stomach pilules
- Geum urbanum D1 dil.

Argentum D6 trit.

- indicated mainly where conflicts have hardened and seem insoluble; past injuries and traumas
- evolution stagnating

- indurated, dry bodily constitution and premature ageing

Use for 4 weeks; discontinue if lively dreams develop or depressive symptoms get worse.

Sulphur D6 trit.

- for chronic constipation, inner chilliness
- indurated, dry bodily constitution evolution stagnating
- no pyrexia or febrile reaction

Use for 4 weeks initially, discontinue if signs of inflammation develop or depressive symptoms get worse.

Mistletoe

Above all in relatively high potencies for chronic depressive states, absence of febrile reaction, predominantly endogenous depressive states

Teas

Lime blossom, chamomile flowers

Baths with essences or extracts

- Calamus tea to treat marked exhaustion or weakness, gastric problems and poor digestion
- Prunus essence for marked exhaustion and weakness, lack of vitality
- Sulphur bath for induration, dry skin and lack of febrile response

Oil baths

for general weakness of vital energies, lack of enveloping warmth and poor generation of warmth, exhaustion: Prunus, Melissa, Thymus, Hypericum, Lavandula, Rosemary, Solum uliginosum

Hyperthermic baths

- if resistant to chemical antidepressants and psychotherapy; lack of febrile response; subnormal temperature (< 36 °C)
- Contraindications: history of tuberculosis, severe cardiac arrhythmias

Footbaths

- Rosemary in the mornings
- Lavender, mustard, sulphur at night

Rhythmic oiling

- to stimulate anabolism generally—arms, back and legs
- whole-body oiling

3. Functional organ diagnosis

In the anthroposophical view of the human being, life in soul and spirit is seen to be connected not only with the brain but in a direct way also with the whole body. Mental illness is therefore considered to relate not only to disorders in brain function (neurotransmitter problems) but also to problems affecting processes in the ma-

ior internal organs. The organs primarily involved are lung, liver, kidney and heart; in a wider sense the spleen, gastrointestinal tract, reproductive organs and endocrine glands are also involved. Mental illness may be connected with functional disorders affecting the internal organs in various ways and degrees. These functional disorders cannot as a rule be detected directly by means of laboratory tests, histological preparations, X-rays, ultrasound or magnetic resonance images. They are "disorders of organ development", i.e. disorders in the etheric powers of growth and development in the organ concerned, and show themselves in functional bodily and in mental symptoms. Careful history-taking and diagnosis from this point of view results in a functional organ diagnosis (3, 5).

The power of growth and development in an organ may be out of order in two ways.

- One goes in the direction of psychotic conditions. The etheric power is partly squeezed out, as it were, of the organ and enters into the inner soul space, leading to productively psychotic symptoms.
- The other goes in the direction of neurosis and personality disorders. Previous trauma, esp. in early childhood, has not been worked through. The traumatic events remain, as it were, on the boundary between inner soul space and unconsciously active organ-creating etheric powers and cannot be integrated. This leads to anxieties, compulsions, depressive moods and functional organic symptoms (4).

Below, a guide is given for functional organ diagnosis.

3.1 Disorder in powers of pulmonary growth and development

a) History

Past pneumonia, tendency to develop bronchitis, disposition to pulmonary TB, tendency to develop other hardening pulmonary conditions (sarcoidosis, fibrosis, etc.)

b) Nature of solid organism

Structure of organs dense, hardened, tending towards rigidity

c) Autonomic system

Hunger and appetite abnormal
Malnutrition

d) Psyche

- Compulsive personality structure with excessively correct and pedan-

- tic thinking and behaviour
- Clear, abstract, mechanistic thinking with no emotional involvement
- Tendency to reflective, brooding thoughts
- Tendency to have illusory, unreal ideas (esp. if history of TB)

3.2 Disorder in powers of hepatic growth and development

- History
 - history of hepatitis
 - alcohol abuse
 - other exposition to toxins
 - tendency to develop maxillary sinusitis
- Nature of fluid organism

Tendency to local or general fluid congestion, tendency to dry up or overflow
- Autonomic system
 - thirst abnormal—too little or too much
 - aversion from fatty and fried foods
 - aversion from meat
- Psyche
 - personality structure emotive, w. tendency to live in images
 - basically likes to be comfortable
 - thinking not very rational, in images, emotive
 - cumbersome thinking processes, tending to obstinacy, opinionated

3.3 Disorder in powers of renal growth and development

- History

Past pyelitis, nephritis

 - tendency to cystitis and ascending urinary tract infection
 - tendency to frontal sinusitis
- Nature of air organism

whole organism not sufficiently or too strongly breathed-through, shallow, superficial breathing or apnoea
- Autonomic system
 - abnormal need for air
 - feels is not getting enough fresh air, unable to breathe fully
- Psyche
 - emotional personality structure with rapid, temperamental mood changes, intense feelings and affects
 - inclined to be inwardly tense, extreme, restlessness, nervousness and hectic

- thinking volatile and superficial, emotionally determined
- rapidly exhausted

3.4 Disorder in powers of cardiac growth and development

- History
 - inflammatory heart diseases
 - malformation of heart (e.g. atrial septal defect)
- Nature of warmth organism
 - problem in generating warmth, distribution of warmth and conversion capacity of warmth
- Autonomic system
 - disorder of movement habit, above all lack of movement
 - generation of warmth inadequate
- Psyche
 - personality structure with moralising tendency
 - over conscientious, anxious nature
 - inclined to be aggressive

3.5 Treatment

All four organ development processes may have changed if there is depressive disorder. One may be to the fore, but several may be involved at the same time.

3.5.1 Process of pulmonary development

Symptoms: Compulsive thinking and behaviour, even distinct compulsions, imagination and emotive qualities impoverished, basic mood dull and brooding with touch of illusory elements that seem religious.

Ferrum sidereum D20 s.c.

for anxiety and limited drive
Use s.c. three times a week in the upper arm for 4–8 weeks

Urtica dioica Ferro culta Rh D3 dil.

for marked compulsive tendency
Use for at least 4 weeks, possibly for longer

Cinis Urticae Ferro cultae D3 trit.

for marked compulsive tendency and affective rigidity
Use for at least 4 weeks, possibly for longer

Mercurius vivus naturalis D12 trit.

Immobility in thinking, difficulties with change, basic approach illusory
Use for a maximum of 4 weeks, then break

Pulmo D6 s.c.

for marked compulsory tendency in thinking and actions
Use to initiate 4-week constitutional treatment of the lung

Compress

Ginger compress over both lungs

3.5.2 Process of liver development

Symptoms: Disorder of drive and loss of will power are dominant, frequently with chronic constipation and intolerance of various foods

Cichorium D3 dil.

for lack of appetite and distinct diurnal mood changes

Use for at least 4 weeks

Cichorium Stanno cultum RH dil. or s.c.

for loss of appetite, diurnal variation and tendency to depressive symptoms becoming chronic, inflammatory liver disease in history.

Hepar-Magnesium D4 s.c.

Depressive symptoms combined with severe exhaustion

Use for at least 4 weeks

three times a week s.c.

Hepar-Stannum D4 s.c.

for treatment in intervals and for more long-term stabilization

Taraxacum Stanno cultum Rh D3 dil.

and s.c.

Lack of vitality, drying out

Adynamic

Use for at least 4 weeks

Chelidonium D3 dil.,

Chelidonium Rh D3 s.c.

Tendency to subicteric states, intolerance of fat and fried foods, eczematous and inflammatory skin reactions

Use for at least 4 weeks

Chelidonium Ferro cultum Rh D3 s.c.

Problem with drive, irritable mood

Use for at least 4 weeks

Choleodoron dil.

Subicteric states, intolerance of fat and fried foods, problems with morning drive

Carduus marianus capsules

History of intoxication with alcohol and other substances

Use long-term

Hepatodoron tablets

Problem sleeping through night, waking early, at c. 3 a.m., diurnal variation

Tendency to chronic constipation

Use long-term

Compresses

Moist, hot compresses with added yarrow or wormwood, or compresses at skin temperature with oxalis essence.

Organ oiling of the liver

- Stannum met. 0.4 % ointment (processes become chronic)

- Ferrum met. 0.4 % ointment (lack of drive but no restlessness)

- Oxalis ointment 30 % (tendency to cramps; traumas in history)

Baths

Sulphur baths for dried-up, sluggish and afebrile constitution

Oil baths

Oxalis oil

3.5.3 Process of renal development

Symptoms: General restlessness, tension, agitation, vibrating inwardly, air hunger and emotional irritability

Cuprum met. prep. D6 s.c.

Tension and restlessness combined with inner chilliness

Use for at least 4 weeks

Chalcosine D4 trit.

tension and restlessness, esp. also if combined with thyroid hyperfunction

Use for at least four weeks

Chamomilla Cupro culta Rh D3 s.c. or

Chamomilla Cupro culta Radix D3 dil.

Inner tension going as far as spasms in the gastrointestinal region.

Use for at least 4 weeks

Melissa Cupro culta Rh D3 s.c. or dil.

Inner tension combined with anxiety and chilliness

Use for at least 4 weeks

Equisetum arvense Rh D6 s.c. or dil.

Lack of structure in lower human being with tendency to fluid deposits or functional congestion of fluids

Use for at least 4 weeks

Carbo Betulae cum Methano D6 trit.

Inner unrest with flatus and tendency to diarrhoea

Use for at least 4 weeks

Carbo Betulae D8 / Crataegus D2 s.c.

Inner unrest combined with dyspnoea and cardiac symptoms

Compresses

- Ginger kidney compresses (inner unrest, tension, air hunger, inner chilliness)
- Equisetum kidney compress (fluid congestion)

Organ massage for kidney

Cuprum met. prep. 0.4 % oil or Red Copper Ointment

Baths

Equisetum tea

Oil baths

Equisetum ex herba 5 % oil

3.5.4 Process of cardiac development

Symptoms: Guilt feelings, fear of death, cardiac anxieties, aggressive irritability or also suppressed aggression

Aurum met. prep. D12 s.c. or trit., also D20 s.c.

Guilt feelings, cardiac anxieties, fear of death, bad conscience

Use long-term

Leonurus cardiaca D3 dil.

Cardiac anxieties combined with inner cardiac unrest, anginal symptoms

Use long-term

Hypericum Auro cultum Rh D3 s.c. or dil.

Depressive symptoms with gloom, lack of perspective and tired of life combined with existential anxieties

Use long-term

Carbo D8/Crataegus D2 s.c.

Anxieties with anginal symptoms and dyspnoea

Use relatively long-term

Crataegus drops

Old people with incipient heart failure, dyspnoea accompanied by anxieties

Cactus comp. II pilules

Anxieties combined with cardiac arrhythmias or anginal pain

Use long-term

Ointment dressing

Aurum Lavandula Rosae comp.

(anxious unrest and problems going to sleep)

Compress

Arnica essence (anxious unrest and anginal pain)

Oil baths

Melissa oil

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