

The Moss Nutrition Digest

Timely Tidbits to Support Your Practice

June, 2020

Balancing Stress in the Time of Corona: A Role For Adaptogenic Herbs

The arrival of a new decade is often met with the hopeful spirit of renewal and change. This year, the new decade brought a worldwide pandemic and global lockdown from which we are only just beginning to emerge.

To address this unprecedented health crisis of 2020, the functional medicine community has been working tirelessly to learn as much as possible about the novel coronavirus. Great emphasis has been given to supporting and optimizing patient immune response to the virus, and rightly so. But there is another aspect of how this pandemic may affect our patients which also deserves attention: its impact on psychological health and well being.

While coping with unknowns is stressful at any time, research suggests that extreme events such as natural disaster, financial crisis or infectious disease outbreak are associated with higher risks of anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress symptoms in many people. Research suggests the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic is having this same, unfortunate effect.

A Spanish study published in May 2020 reported that out of 2,530 university students and staff who responded to an online behavioral health questionnaire, more than 50% reported moderate to extremely severe anxiety, depression and stress related to the outbreak. Chinese studies published in April and May found similar results, with higher social media use in particular being linked to higher odds of anxiety. Reducing “media exposure” to the pandemic was suggested as one possible way to help mitigate these negative psychological effects. Eating well, getting adequate exercise, and taking nutraceuticals researched to help support a healthy stress response may be another.

The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis comprises endocrine organs involved in modulating the human stress response via sympathetic and parasympathetic pathways. Under normal circumstances, HPA axis mechanisms are able to maintain homeostasis in the organism. But when unremitting stress overwhelms the body’s coping capacity, consequences such as adrenal fatigue and metabolic disturbances follow.

Hypertension, high blood sugar and hyperinsulinemia, decreased muscle mass, weight gain and suppressed immune or inflammatory responses are some of the most common metabolic effects of an overtaxed HPA axis.

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Ironically, these same issues represent some of the chief comorbidities known to increase the risk of Covid-19 severity and complications. Therefore, it seems critical at this time to encourage our patients to implement proven and preventive stress management strategies.

Adaptogens are herbs researched to help the body resist the physiological effects of all forms of stress—psychological, biochemical and environmental. Adaptogens function by exerting a range of non-specific effects, such as helping to balance cortisol levels regardless of the direction of the imbalance. According to a 2018 review study, adaptogenic herbs function “via several mechanisms of action associated with the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis and the control of key mediators of stress response”. Such mediators include molecular chaperones, stress-activated protein kinases, nitric oxide and, of course, cortisol.

Some of the most well researched herbs in the adaptogen category include Panax Ginseng, *Eleutherococcus senticosus* (“Eleuthero” for short; previously known as Siberian ginseng), Ashwagandha (also known as Indian ginseng) and *Rhodiola rosea*. These and others have been studied to exert broad ranging beneficial benefits—from helping to promote mental calmness and alertness to enhancing energy and endurance, restful sleep states and mood stability.

To give an example of an adaptogen in action, a double-blind, placebo controlled study published in the *Journal of the American Nutraceutical Association* found that chronically stressed adults taking a patented extract of ashwagandha (Sensoril®) at a dose of 125 mg twice daily for 60-days experienced a highly significant decrease in overall measures of stress, along with multiple improvements in stress-related biochemical measures compared to placebo. (These included significant reductions in cortisol, blood pressure, pulse rate and serum C-Reactive Protein, and significant increases in mean serum DHEAS and hemoglobin.)

Sensoril® Ashwagandha may be found in Moss Nutrition’s [HPA Select®](#) at the same per capsule dose used in the study cited above. In addition to Sensoril®, [HPA Select®](#) contains meaningful levels of Rhodiola, Eleuthero and Panax Ginseng, plus support levels (40 mg) of Licorice, a traditional adrenal tonic. Together, the time honored adaptogenic herbs in this formula may help gently assist the body to adapt to stress, safely and effectively.

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