

ACHIEVING **ZEN** with **Adaptogens**

With commonly used anti-anxiety medications such as benzodiazepines having recently been associated with a significant increased risk of Alzheimer's disease, herbal remedies are looking increasingly attractive in the fight against stress and stress-related conditions, writes **TARA THORN**.



We live in a world of information overload. We take our work home with us and we're glued to our devices until it's time to go to sleep. On top of this, we have financial pressures, parenting woes, relationship strain and other daily stressors. More than ever before, stress is omnipresent, and stress-related conditions such as anxiety and depression are on the rise. In 2015 the Australian Psychological Society's Stress and Wellbeing survey found that anxiety symptoms were the highest they've been in the five years since the survey started. And according to beyondblue, approximately one million Australians suffer from depression annually. There are multiple anti-anxiety and antidepressant drugs on the market but unfortunately many of these come with some pretty dire side effects and often antidepressants simply don't work. The need for natural alternatives to soaring stress rates is required more than ever before. Luckily, there are adaptogens – powerful natural antidotes to the stressors of modern-day life.

What are adaptogens?

Popular in traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurvedic medicine for thousands of years, adaptogens are plant-derived compounds that work with your body to reduce and prevent the physical and mental effects of stress. They help to normalise endocrine function and promote adaptation to stress by helping to balance our sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. Adaptogens are quite miraculous compounds that can have some very real and potent effects on the mind and body. Their amazing ability to support the adrenal glands and balance our stress hormones leads to the positive benefits of reduced stress symptoms such as anxiety, depression and fatigue.

What are the best adaptogens to use?

There are many different adaptogens that we currently know about. For anyone enduring a stressful time, you may want to talk to your naturopathic doctor about which adaptogens might be right for you and your current situation. However, the following are some of the best adaptogens available on the market today that aid in the treatment of stress-related conditions such as anxiety, depression and fatigue.

Holy basil (tulsi)

Holy basil, also known as 'tulsi', has been considered a sacred plant in India for thousands of years where it's revered for its medicinal benefits and is grown profusely in people's houses and around surrounding Hindu temples. In ancient Ayurvedic texts it's been mentioned as the "elixir of life". Studies have shown that holy basil can reduce symptoms of generalised anxiety disorder and exert

general anti-stress effects. Traditionally it has been used to improve cognition, treat coughs, colds, indigestion, asthma and fatigue. It has also been shown to reduce blood glucose levels in humans as well as reduce cortisol (a stress hormone) levels. But beware: do not use if you are trying to fall pregnant as it's also an anti-fertility agent.

Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*)

Ashwagandha has been shown to help significantly reduce anxiety, insomnia and stress-induced depression. Studies have shown its ability to lower cortisol levels as well as reduce LDL (bad)



Ashwagandha

cholesterol. Additionally, this amazing herb has the potential to improve the formation of memories, which may make it beneficial in the treatment of Alzheimer's disease. Ashwagandha is often used as an adjunctive treatment for cancer patients due to its ability



Holy basil





Schizandra

to reduce immunosuppression (suppression of the immune response) and ease the pain of chemotherapy by reducing stress and fatigue. Other syndromes it has been shown to be effective in treating include restless leg syndrome, rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis (spinal arthritis), and polymyositis (a connective tissue disease that triggers inflammation and muscular weakness).



Siberian ginseng

Schizandra

Historically, schizandra has been used to treat insomnia but it's also well known as an anti-stress agent that has the ability to boost cognition, accuracy and attention. It also has the ability to exert cardio-protective qualities and helps to boost the liver's main antioxidant: glutathione, which improves both the function as well as regeneration of the liver and helps to prevent liver damage.

Additionally, schizandra (coupled with Rhodiola, see below) was shown to have an anti-stress effect in rats by balancing their hypothalamus pituitary adrenal axis (HPA axis), which is our stress response feedback loop in the body.

Siberian ginseng (Eleutherococcus senticosus)

Traditional Chinese medicine has used Siberian ginseng over the years to reduce lethargy, fatigue, and low stamina as well as to increase resistance to environmental stress. But it's not just the Chinese who are privy to this herb's powerful benefits. The German Commission E has approved Siberian ginseng as a tonic for use in times of fatigue, debility, declining capacity for work or concentration, and during convalescence. The herb has also been shown to delay the exhaustion stage of adrenal burnout due to its stress-protective effects that regulate both the HPA axis and stress hormones in the body. Additionally, a study of military personnel – who are prone to cardiovascular stress response – showed a reduction in blood pressure and heart rate when treated with Siberian ginseng.

Rhodiola

Rhodiola is an adaptogen that has been shown to reduce fatigue and exhaustion in prolonged stressful situations. The way in which it does this is by influencing some of our key brain chemicals such as serotonin, norepinephrine and our opioids: our natural feel-good chemicals. It's also neuroprotective and might actually work to increase longevity. And in animal studies, rhodiola has been shown to increase serotonin levels as well as exert antidepressant and anti-anxiety activities. **ANH**



Rhodiola