Anxiety? A Doctor Says Ditch the Valerian, Kava Kava, and St. John's Wort

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Want to go the drug-free route with your anxiety? Don't turn to the most common herbal remedies. That's the advice of Kimberly Zoberi, MD, a researcher from Saint Louis University, in St. Louis.

Zoberi warns that there are no studies showing St. John's wort, kava kava or valerian to be effective in treating anxiety disorders. She particularly calls out valerian as a product about which there are no studies at all, but which is among the most commonly recommended online as a natural alternative for anxiety.

"Patients should be extremely cautious about garnering medical advice from the Internet," says Zoberi. "There is no evidence that those medications are effective. If a patient wishes to avoid drug therapy, her doctor can suggest alternatives such as cognitive behavioral therapy."

I've had my own journey around natural products versus pharmaceuticals. Though I try never to impose my beliefs or opinions on anyone, I do have some recommendations no matter where you turn for treatment of your psychological disorder(s):

1. Be a bit skeptical no matter who you're dealing with--health care provider, salesperson or naturopath. Skepticism can help save you wasted time and money, and guard you from potential side effects.
2. Ask about the kind of training the person making the recommendation has received. Medical providers receive extensive training on how the body works. On the natural health side of things, accupunturists do too. Salespeople, on the other hand, generally do not. Also, if a person says they're a doctor, ask what kind. A person with a PhD in philosophy (or even chemistry) can call themselves a doctor, but they are not trained to understand medical treatment.
3. Ask what kind of data the person recommending the treatment is using to make their recommendation? How large were the studies? Did researchers compare the herb or drug to a placebo?
4. Ask about the downsides and dangers. Are there potential side effects or interactions with other medicines? For instance, it is possible to overdose on vitamin A, and St. John's wort interacts with a number of medications.
5. How do you know that the active ingredient that you're looking for in the product is actually in that bottle and what kind of manufacturing and safety standards were followed by the maker?

I'm not saying that non-pharmaceutical alternatives are bad. Heck, I take fish-oil and vitamins and I try to eat only the freshest local foods. The point is do your homework and make informed decisions. You'll be glad you did and sorry you didn't.

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