

Mind Matters



More on beating depression

OK Computer: therapy online

Salsa: shake off the sadness

Natural health service: how going green beats the blues

Feel better with fish

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Gardening with arthritis

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More from Saga

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Technology: which iPod?



Playing dirty

Digging, weeding and planting may lift your mood in more ways than you know, say scientists

Friendly bacteria found in soil may have the same mood-boosting effects as common antidepressants, according to new research carried out at Bristol University. The findings, published in the journal *Neuroscience*, found that mice treated with the soil bacteria appeared more relaxed.

The study revealed that the bacteria, *Mycobacterium vaccae*, stimulated the immune system and activated brain cells to produce more serotonin, the mood-enhancing brain chemical. A lack of serotonin is associated with depression. Some types of antidepressants work by increasing amounts of serotonin in the brain.

The scientists became interested in the project when they heard that cancer patients treated with the bacterium *Mycobacterium vaccae* reported increases in their quality of life. They speculated this could be because the bacteria were activating brain cells to release more serotonin

Dr Chris Lowry, lead author said "These studies help us understand how the body communicates with the brain and why a healthy immune system is important for maintaining mental health. They also leave us wondering if we shouldn't all spend more time playing in the dirt."

Top tips to help beat depression

- Share your experiences: talking to friends and family can be a real help.
- Get in touch with the Depression Alliance which offers support and advice and gives you the chance to talk to other sufferers.
- Find time to relax. Try taking up yoga or listen to a relaxation tape.
- Exercise can help you feel more positive.
- Make sure you have a healthy, balanced diet.
- Hobbies and interests can be a good way of alleviating negative feelings. Don't suffer in silence.
- Visit your doctor and talk through the various treatments available.
- Antidepressants can provide relief; your GP will be able to advise which one would suit you best.

Depression Alliance: www.depressionalliance.org

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