

7 Keys to Naturally Restoring

Brain Health

by Cynthia Libert, M.D.

“Are you feeling stressed, overwhelmed, down, depressed or hopeless?”

Are you struggling with anxiety or panic attacks?” These are words I routinely ask nearly every patient I see. Mental illness affects the majority of people at some point in our lives. I wish I could tell you that there is a quick, easy way to cure stress, anxiety and depression, but recovery is a

process. Even though it usually takes time for the body to completely heal, there are some things that you can do now to calm your brainwaves and feel better immediately. Today I want to share with you some holistic health practices that you can use right away to jump start the healing of your body and mind.

First, I want to make one thing very clear, depression and anxiety disorders are NOT simply “in your head.” These conditions are every bit as real as cancer, heart disease or diabetes. Over-exposure to stress hormones accounts for the vast majority of all primary care visits in the United States. Almost all illness is stress-related. That is, all illness is either caused by stress or aggravated by stress. And, of course, illness causes stress!



Stress is linked to the six leading causes of death: heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis and suicide.

Stress is the #1 reason why people:

- Eat poorly
- Quit healthy lifestyle programs
- Abuse drugs and alcohol



Most of us wake up to an alarm clock in the morning causing a burst of adrenaline to enter our blood stream. Many of us face other stressors throughout the day: traffic, bills, challenging work, the demands of parenthood, strained marital relationships and health problems. Continual exposure to stressors is a biochemical storm that excites our sympathetic nervous system, putting our entire body on alert. Over time this takes a toll on our body and mental health. Our individual stressor-tolerance varies based on our unique:

- genetics
- diet
- toxic burden
- health status
- occupation
- lifestyle
- social skills
- community network
- family and friends
- human experience

We all have weak links in our bodies where stress related symptoms can show up. Everyone's breaking point is unique. Stress can cause us to experience some or all of the following:

- Digestive upset like heartburn, bloating, constipation and diarrhea
- Breathing difficulties



- Cardiovascular symptoms such as chest pain, heart palpitations, high blood pressure and even heart attacks
- Physical problems like back pain or headaches
- Emotional suffering with depressed mood, guilty feelings, phobias, anxiety and sometimes feeling like we'd be better off dead
- Mental impairment like brain fog and memory loss
- Sleep disorders
- Immune system depression with frequent infections
- Hormonal imbalance, irregular periods and eating disorders

I am a conventionally trained medical doctor with a board certification in family medicine. However, I no longer practice strictly in the traditional model that is heavily focused on pharmaceutical prescriptions. I went into medicine to help people get healthy, but sadly, during the process of my medical education, I gathered that doctors and patients operate in a broken system. To be sure, most doctors are doing the very best they can, but pharmaceutical drugs and invasive surgeries are limited in their ability to heal. Drugs are not THE answer to our epidemic of chronic disease: obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, cancer, mental illness and the like. In these disease

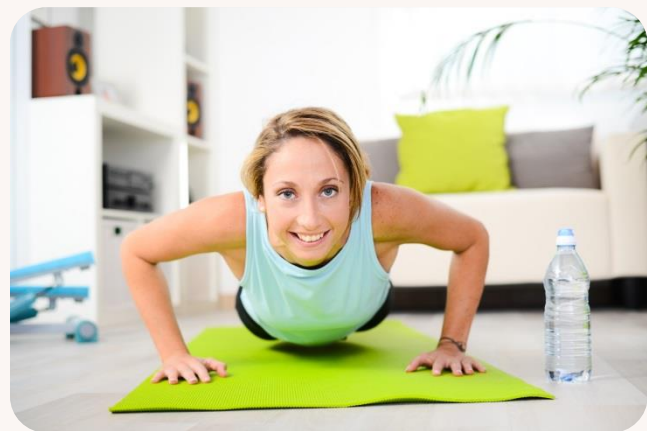


states **prescription drugs can act like Band-Aids to cover up symptoms**. Synthetic drugs can improve the quality of your life or even extend life, but for the most part they do not correct the underlying driving force of the disease process. Unfortunately, patients who take prescription medications for a chronic disease, typically experience a slow decline in functioning over time. However, when the root cause of the disease is addressed through lifestyle changes and simple natural treatments, patients can truly recover and become vibrantly healthy. After completing my conventional medical training, I knew I needed more tools in my doctor's bag (e.g. nutrition, herbs, vitamins, biofeedback and fitness prescriptions)

to fully support my patients in healing, so I did extensive post-graduate studies, and in 2009 I became a diplomate of the American Board of Integrative Holistic Medicine.

Thankfully, many of my physician colleagues recognize the limitations of our current conventional model and a whole new “functional” medical paradigm is emerging. As a functional/integrative/holistic doctor, I view the body as an integrated whole and use a systems biology approach. Emerging technology allows me to get at the root cause of dysfunction in the body, long before standard medical testing shows a disease state. Then instead of matching the problem with a drug, I use education and inspiration to help patients make healthy lifestyle changes.

I believe that proper nutrition, physical exercise and spiritual growth are the most powerful ways of healing our body. In my medical practice I use individualized natural remedies (e.g. probiotics, vitamins, minerals and herbs) to help patients heal. We focus on optimizing gut health, correcting underlying biochemical imbalances, ridding the body of excessive toxicity, improving energy metabolism, balancing hormones and boosting the immune system. I still use prescription medications, very sparingly, but I believe that in the future we will use less and less pharmaceutical medications as our understanding of the body increases.



Now I want to specifically address two of the myths of modern medicine as they relate to the treatment of anxiety and depression. I do need to give credit for the following ideas to Dr. Mark Hyman for his pioneering work in the area of functional medicine. He has been instrumental in helping me to step back and clearly see some of these myths of modern conventional medicine, especially as it relates to mental health.



The “Name It and Tame It” Myth

The myth of the diagnosis is quite engrained in psychiatry and actually all of modern medicine. As physicians, we are trained to think that if we know the name of your disease, we know what’s wrong with you. This is simply not true. Granted, there is some sense of relief for the patient and satisfaction for the doctor to put a label on your condition, but it’s not as helpful as it seems. In fact, this practice of labeling people with specific mental illnesses has led to the problem of placing large groups of people with similar symptoms into categories and simply matching the prescription drug to the name of the illness. For example, if you are feeling down most days, having trouble sleeping, abnormal guilty thoughts, fatigue, change in appetite for two weeks or more, you qualify for the diagnosis of major depression.

This does not, however, tell us **WHY** you are depressed. What is the root cause? Are you suffering from the physiological effects of chronic stress from a job you despise? Do you have a hidden food sensitivity that is causing a gut disturbance

WHY?

and generalized inflammation in the body and brain? Are you eating a diet high in processed foods and simply have omega-three fatty acid and vitamin D deficiencies? All of these individual problems can result in the symptoms of depression, but all have

different root causes and require individualized treatment.

The second myth that I would like to dispel is that pharmaceutical drugs are the main treatment for mental illness. Clearly, depression is not a Zoloft deficiency. Anxiety is not a Xanax deficiency. These medications can, of course, be helpful and even life-saving in some situations, but they are by no means the total answer to treating mental illness. The brain and body are not separate. Not only does mental illness affect the entire body, **dysfunction in the body causes mental illness!** The brain can be inflamed and dysfunctional from a combination of many things such as: social isolation, emotional distress, hormonal imbalance, chronic stress, poor diet, sedentary lifestyle, food sensitivities, obesity, environmental toxins, micronutrient deficiencies and blood sugar-insulin imbalances to name just a few.

The deeper reality here is that we are spiritual beings. We are residing for the moment, in a physical body. Therefore, the treatment of mood disorders like depression and anxiety requires a holistic - mind, body and spirit approach. Most



of us intuitively know that mental illness affects your whole being. Conventional medicine offers psychotropic pharmaceutical drugs to treat the *symptoms* of anxiety and depression, but do not address the underlying emotional and spiritual components.

I've noticed that most patients struggle with the decision of whether or not to take an anti-depressant pill to feel better. They question why they cannot “pull themselves up by the boot straps” or “simply snap out of it.” They often feel badly or guilty about the prospect of taking a mood altering medication. People of faith who are affected by mental illness may have an additional layer of negative feelings and guilt about using medication treatment. They often express thoughts that they are somehow failing to trust God for their healing. At times they may even doubt that God is hearing their heart cries for help. All of these feelings are understandable, and I don't want to minimize the pain of these thoughts, but if this describes your experience, I want to encourage you. **God has not forgotten you. He loves you deeply and is right there with you in your pain.** He assures us that He has overcome the world and that our troubles, however crushing they may seem at the time, are light and momentary when viewed through the lens of eternity and His ultimate plan for our lives. While anti-depressants can give much needed symptom relief for some patients suffering from mental illness, true permanent healing requires a holistic approach to your body, mind and spirit. Anti-depressant pills can treat the symptoms of depression and anxiety remarkably well in some situations. As I have stated, they can be life-saving and are almost always indicated if the depression is severe or associated with suicidal ideation.

I am now going to share with you an outline of the general advice I give to most of my patients suffering with depression and anxiety. Remember that mental illness can be life-threatening and the information that I am sharing is for educational purposes only. Always consult your physician or mental healthcare professional for advice about your particular situation. Never stop prescription medications without first seeking the advice and working closely with your health care provider. You also want to be sure to have a full medical evaluation, including a physical examination, before pursuing treatment for mental illness. There are a wide variety of medical problems that can cause mood disturbances such as thyroid disease, anemia, hormonal imbalance, dietary and micronutrient deficiencies, hidden food sensitivities, neurological conditions, sleep disorders, and toxin exposures. It is



essential to take a comprehensive look at your health with a detailed medical, social and lifestyle history, laboratory testing and a physical examination to uncover root causes of any illness.

I am going to briefly outline a list of seven principles for a healthy, balanced lifestyle and optimal brain function. Many people who make positive changes in their lifestyle experience rapid and progressive relief from anxiety, depression and overwhelming stress. I use these principles as a foundation of my treatment plan for every patient, regardless of what type of illness they may have at the time. Here are the seven keys to restoring brain health naturally:

#1 Optimize Nutrition

#2 Calm your Brainwaves

#3 Restore Hormone Balance

#4 Put Out the Fire of Inflammation

#5 Enhance your Detoxification System

#6 Heal your Gut

#7 Discover your M & P

Before we dive into the specifics, I want to remind you to please discuss any changes you plan to make with your medical provider. Not all of these ideas are appropriate for all people. You deserve to work in a one on one setting to receive a customized treatment plan. These are general guidelines and are intended for educational purposes only. Remember, *it usually takes time for the body to heal*, so consider this education the first step in your journey toward better health.



Key #1 Optimize Nutrition

As the old saying goes, “we are what we eat!” Our biology demands the proper raw materials to function optimally—the right balance of quality protein, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals. God built healing compounds into the colorful pigments in plant foods, called phytonutrients. This is a big reason why plant



food can ward off cancer and support our well-being and function. Nearly all of us are nutritionally imbalanced in some way. One of the most powerful tools you have to change your brain, nervous system and your health in general is your fork! Food is not just calories or energy. Food contains information that talks to your genes, turning them on or off and affecting their function moment to moment. Aside from prayer, food is the probably the fastest acting and most powerful medicine you can use to change your health. This discovery is called Nutrigenomics. Think of your genes as the software that runs everything in your body. Just like your computer software, it only does what you instruct it to do with the stroke of your keyboard. The foods you eat are the keystrokes that send messages to your genes telling them what to do—creating health or disease! Imagine what messages you are sending your genes by eating a fast food burger, fries and soft drink.

Here is the basic nutritional advice I give to my patients: **choose an anti-inflammatory, nutrient dense and high fiber diet.** To quote the title of a popular nutrition book: “eat real food, not too much, mainly plants.” If your grandmother never heard of it or you cannot pronounce it, don’t eat it! Ask your medical provider to suggest a proper calorie goal for you to achieve and maintain a healthy body weight.

Key #2 Calm your Brainwaves

There is an approach in modern psychology called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) that is designed to help people become aware of inaccurate or negative thinking. The therapist works with the client to help them learn to restructure their thoughts to view challenging situations more clearly and respond to them in a more effective way. For example, people who are prone to depression may have a habit of cognitive distortions such as black and white thinking, overgeneralization, and catastrophizing.

God designed our central nervous system. Holy Spirit transforms us by renewing our minds. We are instructed to take every thought captive



and hold it up to the light of His word. “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” ~2 Timothy 1:7 Authorized (King James) Version (AKJV). Holy Spirit is our teacher. We simply need to ask for the wisdom and insight that we need and He will provide. Remember, it takes time to heal the brain and body, and you will need support along the way. Consulting a pastor or trusted friend can be most helpful in this process.

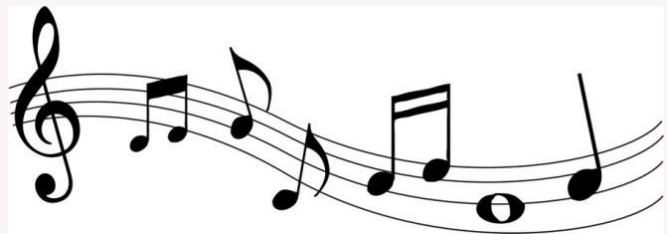
Here’s a brief list of other ways to calm your brainwaves:

- ✓ Start a journal of three things that went well during your day. Periodically look back over your journal entries and practice being grateful for the little things.
- ✓ Learn and practice soft belly breathing.
- ✓ Learn to deal with your ANTS (automatic negative thoughts).
- ✓ Take warm, relaxing baths with lavender essential oil and Epson salts.
- ✓ Learn how to say NO to avoid excessive obligations.
- ✓ Listen to classical music often.
- ✓ Consider getting a pet or volunteering at the local animal shelter.
- ✓ Discuss with your medical provider herbs and supplements to help you adapt and respond to stress, soothe anxiety and lift your mood. Some of my favorites are L-theanine, Ashwagandha, Passionflower, Ylang ylang and Lavender essential oils, St. John’s wort and Lemon balm.

As you address the biological causes of mood disorders with your physician, also consider psychotherapy and/or working closely with your pastor. Ask your doctor for a recommendation of a therapist who would be a good match for you.

Key #3 Restore Hormone Balance

Our hormones, including insulin, thyroid, sex hormones, stress hormones and many more are a symphony of molecules. They have to work in harmony for you to be healthy. Talk to your medical provider about any hormone related symptoms you are having. Blood or saliva hormone testing may be helpful to identify any imbalance. Exercise, weight loss, herbs, nutrients and bio-identical hormones may help bring your body



back into hormonal balance. Often measures to improve your sleep and your stress response can bring hormones back into balance without needing to resort to hormones. Starting a regular, gentle exercise program can be highly effective in boosting your feel good hormones and neurotransmitters.

Key #4 Put out the Fire of Inflammation

We are equipped with an immune system to protect and defend ourselves from foreign invaders and abnormal cells inside our own body. When the immune system is overactive it can cause systemic inflammation that is like a chemical fire damaging the body. Inflammation of the brain occurs in almost all psychiatric conditions, as well as most other chronic disease states. Maintaining a healthy body weight with a proper diet and exercise regimen is one of the most effective ways to decrease inflammation. Managing stress and getting adequate sleep (7.5+ hours a night for most people) are critical in decreasing inflammation in your body. If you have an inflammatory condition, like rheumatoid arthritis, then work with your medical provider on getting the disease state under control. Ask your doctor to draw a C-reactive protein (CRP) blood test to determine your level of inflammation. CRP is an acute phase reactant, a protein made by the liver and released into the blood within a few hours after tissue injury, the start of an infection or other cause of inflammation. The optimal value is 0.5 mg/L or less. I recommend drinking a green smoothie daily and adding turmeric root to your diet to decrease inflammation.



Key #5 Enhance your Body's Natural Detoxification System

Our bodies must eliminate all of the metabolic wastes and toxins, which we take in from the environment through our food, air, water and medications. The toxic burden in the 21st century

is overwhelming and often our bodies can't keep up. This leads to illness. I advise my patients suffering with a mood disturbance, to try a food allergen elimination diet, in an attempt to see if a hidden food allergy is at the root of their symptoms. Detoxification may sound a little scary. You might be thinking that I'm going to ask you to drink green smoothies for three meals a day or take some crazy herbal concoction that will leave you running to the bathroom every 15 minutes. Let me assure you that I mean nothing of the sort.

The vast majority of my patients come in with vague and annoying symptoms such as fatigue, headaches, brain fog, food sensitivities, bloating and joint pains. Many are suffering with serious health concerns such as mood disorders, migraine headaches, asthma, autoimmune disease, acid reflux, irritable bowel syndrome, diabetes and obesity. All of these symptoms and disease processes can be related to a buildup of environmental toxins. I find that a simple 21 day detoxification protocol often helps to clear up bothersome symptoms and jumpstart weight loss for people. So when I use the word detoxification (detox for short), I am speaking of scientifically sound medical advice for getting rid of allergenic foods and environmental toxicity. This process can also go a step further and address emotional baggage, unhealthy relationship and our spiritual health. The process involves infusing our lives with more of the good stuff!

An intelligently designed detox helps you get rid of unwanted pounds. It also helps you to heal your body on every level. Let me first talk a little bit about some of the benefits that I see happening with my detoxification protocol. Then I'll get into some of the specifics about what my protocol involves. The number one benefit is simply that patients feel better. When you complete a detox, you typically feel more vibrant and alive. I often hear comments such as, "I didn't really know how bad I felt until I started feeling this good." People tend to get used to dealing with low-grade fatigue, digestive issues and suboptimal functioning because they kind of creep up on you over time.

People also tend to lose weight. Usually people lose 7 to 10 pounds during the 21 day detox process. We know from the latest scientific research that weight loss is not simply a matter of calories in versus calories out. It's the type of food that you're putting into your body that has the biggest impact on your weight. It's clear that a diet high in sugar and white flour will trigger food addiction and overeating.



These foods tend to spike insulin levels and cause inflammation in the body. This leads to the storage of belly fat. People also tend to lose their ability to tell when they're full.

So the great news is that you don't have to severely restrict your calories to lose weight. You simply have to eat the right foods. The wonderful thing about detoxifying from sugar is that it helps to stabilize your blood sugar and eliminate food cravings. The processed food industry has pretty much hijacked our taste buds. Foods are being engineered to alter our brain chemistry, hormones and metabolism. We know that sugar is eight times more addictive than cocaine. This makes it very difficult to use willpower alone for weight loss. Most patients fail to lose weight if they simply try to cut back on calories without improving the quality of the food they are eating. A scientifically sound metabolic detoxification protocol helps you to break the addiction to sugar, flour and other processed foods. Another benefit of detoxifying your diet is that for many people it can eliminate food sensitivities.

So, as promised, I will now get into the specifics about how I help patients detoxify. First of all, I help them create a 21 day clean diet plan. It involves going off sugar, caffeine, fake fats, artificial sweeteners, white flour and alcohol. The first 3 to 4 days can be a little rough, but by the two week point, patients are usually feeling fantastic. You have to make sure you start every day with a high-quality protein for breakfast. I typically do a protein shake and a handful of nuts. I encourage patients to eat an unlimited amount of non-starchy vegetables. The goal is to have at least four servings a day. Veggies have amazing detoxification power due to their vital nutrients and fiber content. I also encourage patients to eat an adequate amount of high quality fat. Fat helps you feel full and balances your blood sugar. Fat is necessary to fuel your cells. I recommend protein and a good fat with every meal. Good fats include nuts, seeds, extra-virgin olive oil, coconut butter, avocados and omega-3 fatty acids from clean fish. Of course, drinking plenty of water and getting gentle daily exercise is a key part of the process as well.

The power of social support when making any healthy lifestyle change is really critical. Most patients do better if they have a partner or friend who can go through the detoxification process alongside of them. We encourage our patients



to bring their significant other along to their appointments, particularly with the nutritionist at my practice.

Nutrition is just one component of a detoxification program. It's also important to examine your thought life, your emotions and your spiritual health as well. Letting go of unhealthy relationships and past hurts can be just as healing as a nutrition based detox protocol. Here are some beautiful and inspiring words for you to ponder. This quote was written on the wall in Mother Teresa's home for children in Calcutta:

- ❖ People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.
- ❖ If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.
- ❖ If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway.
- ❖ If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.
- ❖ What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.
- ❖ If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.
- ❖ The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.
- ❖ Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.
- ❖ In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.

What an inspiration! I hope I've given you some food for thought about perhaps starting a detoxification process in your own life.



Key #6 Heal your Gut

Digesting, absorbing and assimilating all the food we eat is critical for health. Our digestive systems must also protect us from internal toxins, bugs and potential allergens, as well as eliminate wastes. Breakdown anywhere in the process creates illness. Hidden food allergens such as gluten can cause gut



problems, inflammation and mood disorders. If you have not been tested for food sensitivities, a skin test or blood test may be in order. Ask your medical provider about which option is best for you. Most people can benefit from a high quality probiotic and vitamin D3 supplement for optimal gut health. Be sure to discuss this with your primary care physician. If you are having heartburn, constipation, bloating, diarrhea or any other bowel disturbance, talk with a holistic medical provider about a regimen to heal your gut.

I use the **5R Functional Medicine Approach to optimize gut health:**

- ❖ **Remove:** take away stuff from the body that's present, but shouldn't be (e.g. hidden food allergens, toxins, pathogenic bacteria, yeast and viruses)
- ❖ **Replace:** put back stuff into the body that is not there, but should be (e.g. hydrochloric acid in the stomach, pancreatic digestive enzymes)
- ❖ **Re-Inoculate:** reintroduce friendly bacteria for optimal gut health (e.g. probiotics)
- ❖ **Repair:** use food as medicine along with therapeutic nutrients and herbs to heal the lining of the digestive tract.
- ❖ **Retain:** maintain a long-term healthy gut balance through therapeutic lifestyle changes

Key #7 Discover your M & P

Ultimately, we exist to glorify God. A life of meaning and purpose, filled with love and connection to God and others is essential for health. Feeling powerless, isolated and overworked will strain your nervous system, and left unchecked these feelings will lead to burnout and breakdown. What are you passionate about?

What brings meaning and purpose to your life? How can you use your time, talents and energy to serve God and others? What legacy do you want to leave behind when you leave this earth? I encourage you to take some time today to prayerfully reflect on your life and ask God for direction.



So, how are you feeling? You may be



thinking that changing your lifestyle seems like a daunting task. The good news is that we don't have to do it alone or in our own strength. Thankfully, when we put our trust in God and rely on His strength, He will guide our path. My life scripture verses are Romans 12:1-2. In the first eleven chapters of the book of Romans the apostle Paul explains how God redeemed the human race through the sacrifice of His son, Jesus Christ. He then states "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." Romans 12:1-2 NIV. A relationship with God actually renews your mind. God can heal us through prayer and immersion in His word by reading the Bible regularly.

How can I find a support group?

I established a private Facebook group for women only. My vision for this group is that it will provide a place of community, support and encouragement for women from all over the world. I invite you to share your experiences and get advice from other women suffering from stress, anxiety and depression. If you'd like to request access to this group, please send me your email address to doc@drlibert.org.



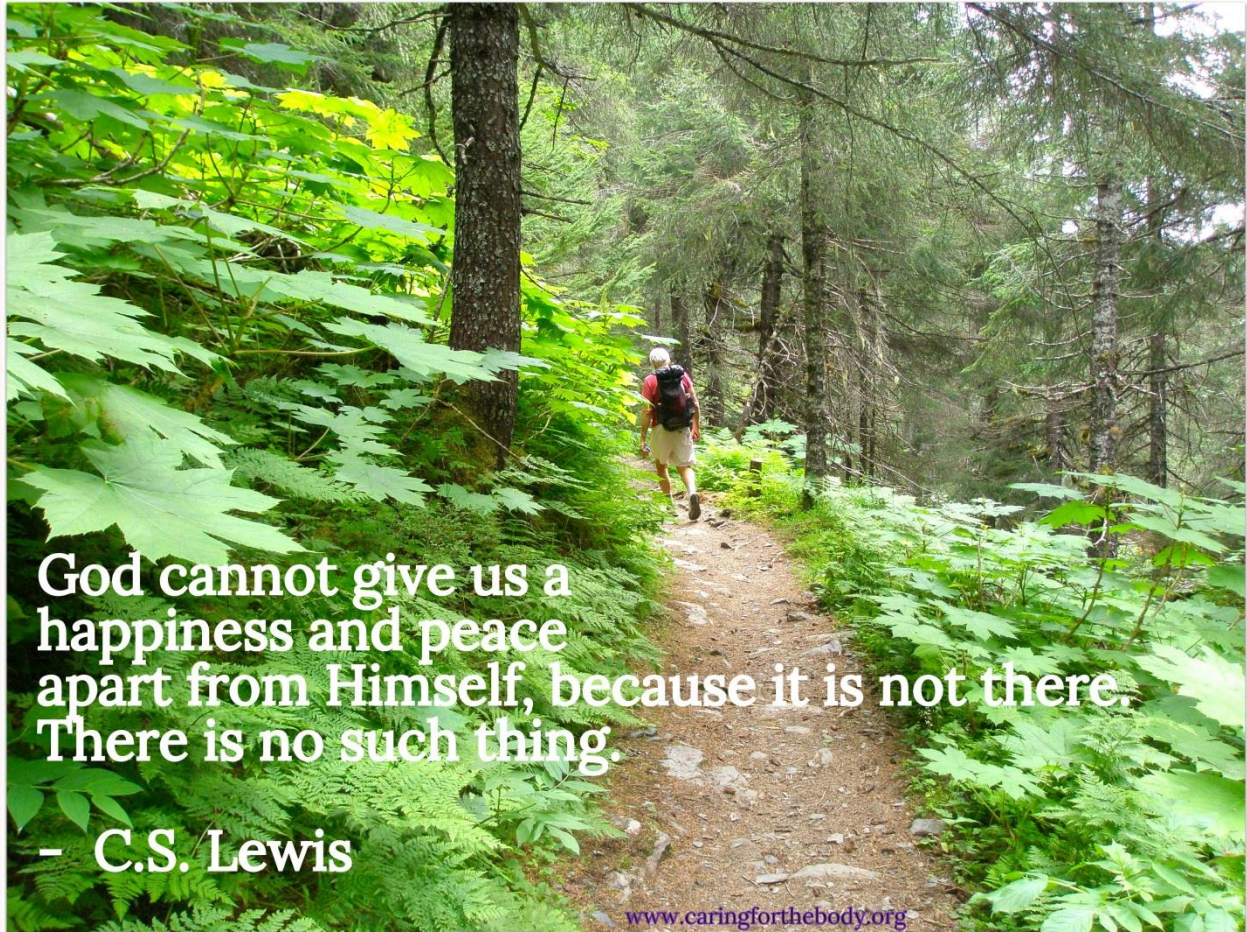
There is so much more that I want to share with you! I encourage you to learn more about my one-on-one health coaching program entitled "Experience Freedom from Overwhelming Stress, Anxiety & Depression."

I wish you abundant blessings of joy, peace, health, contentment and love!

Cynthia Libert, M.D.

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