

A Holistic Approach to Health¹

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

Our speaker on July 26, [Marcey Shapiro, MD](#), is an integrative medicine family physician located in Albany. She has extensive training and experience in many areas of natural medicine, including Western and Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, mind-body techniques, flower essences, homeopathy, breathing techniques, nutritional therapies, Scenar[®], and hands on modalities including Ortho-bionomy[®] and Biodynamic Osteopathy. She uses integrative and complementary medicine as part of an overall approach to health, wellness, emotional well-being, relief of anxiety and depression, and stress reduction. She is the author of two books, *Transforming the Nature of Health*, 2012, and *Freedom from Anxiety: A Holistic Approach to Emotional Well-Being*, 2014.

Dr. Shapiro is a family practice doctor, not a psychiatrist, but she has had a lifelong problem with anxiety and had to learn to calm herself and remain self-aware. She has done this with natural methods, in the belief that if there's an imbalance, she should discover and correct it. She said that her parents were great believers in doctors and the power of traditional medicine. She herself studied in that tradition, but she also developed an interest in herbal medicine while in school and has since included it in her practice.



MARCEY SHAPIRO, MD

All of this led to the focus of Dr. Shapiro's talk: the training she has taken with the non-profit [Walsh Research Institute](#) on brain biochemistry and its imbalances in mental disorders. This training reflects the work of William J. Walsh, PhD, FACN, author of [Nutrient Power: Heal Your Biochemistry and Heal Your Brain](#). In his work, Walsh had performed nutritional studies of more than 30,000 cases, Dr. Shapiro said, including people with schizophrenia, depression, bipolar, ADHD, and other mental conditions. Patterns emerged from these cases showing metabolic imbalances and what nutrient treatments were effective in treating them. Walsh started teaching his method to practitioners about five years ago. About 80% of his trainees, she noted, are psychiatrists and family physicians.

Dr. Shapiro made clear that the levels of imbalance are great enough that the nutrients must be taken in the form of dietary supplements. They cannot be corrected with simple changes in diet. She also noted that the sooner the imbalance is detected, the more likely you are to get a positive result.

¹ In line with our commitment to explore alternative perspectives on mental illness, NAMI East Bay shares this report on Dr. Shapiro's talk about treatment of brain biochemistry and the Walsh Method. We remind readers that the exact causes of mental illness are still under scientific investigation.

The Walsh Method identifies five basic patterns of imbalance and their associated symptoms and prevalence in various brain disorders: over methylation, under methylation, copper overload, elevated kryptopyrrole, and heavy metal toxicity. In her practice, Dr. Shapiro bases about half of her analysis on lab work such as blood and urine tests and half on talking with patients and learning about their symptoms, age of onset, and other factors.

Under methylation represents an imbalance between methyl groups (CH₃) and folate in the body. Methyl takes part in many of the body's reactions, such as metabolism, DNA repair, epigenetics, immune response, and heart health. In Walsh's studies, 28% of schizophrenics had this pattern, and people with high folate and low methyl respond well to SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors). Schizophrenics with under methylation tend to shut down when they go into crisis.

Some of the characteristics of people with low methyl—but not all symptoms are present in everyone with the imbalance—are a low pain threshold; perfectionist tendencies and obsessive-compulsive nature; watery eyes, plentiful mucus, and tendency toward seasonal allergies; a competitive nature and a drive toward accomplishment; and inner tension. This pattern is also a factor in people on the autism spectrum and with antisocial personality disorder.

Over methylation, or an excess of folate in the body, is a pattern appearing in about 20% of people with depression and 40% with schizophrenia. These are people with high levels of serotonin and dopamine. People with this pattern tend to do well with benzodiazepines. Schizophrenics with over methylation also tend to be more physically active during a break and have delusions and hallucinations such as hearing voices.

Some characteristics of the over methylation pattern include anxieties, which become worse if the person is taking SSRIs; dry eyes and mouth; a high pain threshold; and an active nature.

Copper overload results in elevated levels of norepinephrine, because copper drives the reaction that turns dopamine into norepinephrine. This pattern is found in 17% of people with depression but negligible in people with schizophrenia. Walsh found 28% of the general population also had this pattern.

Characteristics are extreme anxiety, bad temper, and postpartum depression. In general, people with this imbalance have a hormone intolerance and can experience mental health breaks at times of hormonal stress such as puberty and menopause.

Pyrrole disorder is caused by a deficiency of zinc and vitamin B6. Walsh found that 19% of people with depression and 20% with schizophrenia have this pattern, and that they can be helped by SSRIs. The condition is determined with a urine test.

The characteristics of kryptopyrroluria include temper, mood swings, and poor stress control; a sensitivity to bright lights, odors, fabric textures, and clothing labels; little or no dream retention; and pathological social interactions. When Walsh studied patients in prison, he found some sociopaths had 200 times the level of pyrroles detected in normal people.

Heavy metal toxicity is associated with 5% of people with depression. Heavy metals can interfere with microbes in the gut, which produce some of the body's neurotransmitters. Characteristics of heavy metal toxicity include bad breath and a metallic taste in the mouth.

“Our bodies are a cooperative venture,” Dr. Shapiro said. “Each one of us carries within us a ‘microbiome’ that can be as complex and have as many cells as those comprising what we think of as our own bodies. We need more research into this microbial population.”

She noted other imbalances can also be detected and corrected, such as gluten intolerance, thyroid deficiency, porphyria—related to the madness of King George III, and homocysteine levels.

Some of the blood and urine tests that she uses in diagnosing these imbalances are covered by insurance or Medicare, while others are not. Some of them can be very expensive. Tests she uses include SAME/SAH methylation profile, serum copper and serum zinc, urine kryptopyrrole, vitamin D, C-reactive protein (for identifying inflammation), homocysteine, thyroid, and histamine levels. For each of these tests, there is a normal range and a functional level. She noted, for example, that a high histamine level was associated with under methylation.

Some imbalances, she said, can be corrected in a month or two, such as kryptopyrrole, while others may take longer. In any case, the patient is advised to stay on his or her nutrient supplements just as if they were a pharmaceutical prescription.

Q. What about Omega-3 fatty acids?

They can be helpful in brain development, reducing inflammation, and mild depression, but are high in pyrroles. Some products take out the pyrroles and preserve the essential oils, eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA).

Q. Have you treated people with severe mental illness using these methods?

A woman patient with severe postpartum depression after the birth of her first child developed bipolar disorder. She was treated for copper toxicity and recovered in three to four months. She now avoids touching copper items such as pipes and bracelets, or eating foods rich in copper like avocados and oysters. Another patient with a diagnosis of schizophrenia was temperamentally explosive with high energy. He was found to have kryptopyrrole and improved with two to four months of treatment.

Q. If an imbalance is low, you can add the nutrient. But what if the imbalance is to the high side?

Most of these imbalances are between two agents, such as between methyl and folate, or between copper and zinc. So, for example, adding more zinc to the body results in less copper.

Q. Do you combine these nutrient therapies with traditional medicine? And what is the American Medical Association’s position on all of this?

Dr. Shapiro said she does not take patients off their traditional stabilizing medications. She wants to do what is most effective while at the same time being the least toxic alternative. As to the AMA, they have not yet weighed in on the subject.

“Medication is usually just a patch on the problem,” she said. “I want to figure out what is going on with the patient and make it better.”