

RHEUMATISM

AND

MENTAL

DEPRESSION

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By

Peter F. Somerville

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JANUARY, 1960

First edition 1937.

Second edition 1954.

Third edition revised and enlarged 1959

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Dedicated, with gratitude, to the memory of
Alexander Haig, M.A., M.D. Oxon., F.R.C.P.,
author of "Uric acid as a factor in the causation
of disease" and other books; formerly Physician
to the Metropolitan Hospital and to the Royal
Hospital for Children and Women; at one time
Casualty Physician to St. Bartholomew's Hospital.

*They say that a man is as
old as his arteries. Here is the
secret of keeping the arteries
young.*

P.F.S.

THAT TIRED FEELING IN THE MORNING.

Many years ago I was spending a holiday in Scotland at the seaside. I had every reason to be moderately happy. The particular forenoon that I remember was sunny and very warm; I was in a beautiful part of the world with great hills behind, and a broad expanse of blue sea in front; I had no business or social troubles; I knew that my health was good; and I was with friends. Yet I felt useless and depressed.

I was greatly puzzled about it. I have little curiosity about the affairs of my neighbours or about the doings of the nobility and gentry, but anything in the nature of a problem in natural phenomena arouses my interest immediately. I had noticed those mysterious fits of depression on previous occasions. This particular forenoon made the deeper impression on me in as much as my mood was strikingly out of keeping with my environment.

The depression wore off as it always had done. In the evening I felt clear-minded and cheerful. But the mystery remained. Why should I feel depressed in the early part of the day when I ought to feel strong and bright, and feel bright towards the end of the day when I ought to be growing tired? Why more depressed the hotter the forenoon? It seemed a topsy-turvy state of affairs.

The problem lay at the back of my mind for a year. At the end of that time I was in Boston, Mass., and finding myself at a loose end one evening, I drifted into the public library as I usually do in a strange town. I had heard a good deal at home about Dr. Haig—he was a Scot who practised in London—but I had read none of his books. I came across his name in the Boston Library catalogue and got out "Uric acid as a factor in the causation of disease." To my intense delight I found my depression problem solved so clearly, so convincingly, that I adopted Haig's advice about

diet the following day and followed it strictly for ten years with excellent results.

At the end of ten years I made a partial change. Dr. Haig rules out meat, eggs, fish, the pulses (peas, beans), tea, coffee, cocoa, and the stronger stimulants on the ground that they introduce uric acid into the body and cause disease. On his analysis, tea is much more harmful than coffee, cocoa less harmful than coffee. I continued to do without tea and coffee and the stronger stimulants, and have continued to do without them ever since; but I went back to meat, and took eggs and the pulses as they came. I was back on an ordinary diet except for tea and coffee. It was not that I was dissatisfied with the amount of energy developed by the vegetarian diet. It was simply that I became tired of the monotony of it.

The monotony was my fault, not Haig's. He shows how the daily menu can be varied, but for a number of years I was living in lodgings and found it difficult to get the variety he prescribes. Or it may be that I have a disinclination to give people trouble. In any case, I made no attempt to get special dishes cooked, relying mainly on cheese and milk and eggs for nourishment. This food kept me fit and strong; but I gradually tired of the fare. I was not aware of any change in my physical condition when I abandoned vegetarianism, and I have come to the conclusion that for me, at any rate, the food part of Dr. Haig's theory is of less importance than the drink part.

It may be that by going back to meat I was taking in more uric acid than formerly but was not retaining it as I have stuck religiously to a non-stimulating diet which would permit it to pass quickly out of my system. This is only a suggestion. According to Haig, many foods contain some uric acid in varying degrees. If we decided to eat no food that contained uric acid there would be very little for us to eat. Even oatmeal contains uric acid. Nothing would induce me to give up my porridge in the morning; and I don't think it would ever be necessary. If we avoid all stimulants and have a daily hot bath the uric acid we consume in food will not do us very much harm. That, at least, is the conclusion I have come to.

Of the benefit of Haig's advice about drink I have no doubt whatever. I consider it one of the most valuable discoveries of all time. Dr. Haig presents his theory as a whole, and supports it with technical arguments and explanations about which I am not in a position to offer any opinion; but so far as it concerns drink, the broad general argument agrees in every detail with my own experience.

I cannot presume to say whether Dr. Haig is right or wrong as to what happens in the blood stream when I drink stimulants; but I know that something happens. The scientific view taken by Dr. Haig agrees with what seems to me the common-sense view.

I do not propose to explain Dr. Haig's theory as he explains it. Readers who want this will find it in his own books. I propose to explain it my own way. My explanation owes everything to Dr. Haig, but I daresay that in applying his advice and studying the effect of it, I have discovered one or two points of interest that had not occurred to him or that he had not taken the trouble to develop.

He rules all stimulants out of diet. Many people regard stimulants as the drinks one buys in a public house, and strongly condemn them, while they complacently drink tea or coffee. Haig makes no distinction. He rules out tea and coffee as he does beer and whisky.

I have seen it stated that alcohol is not a stimulant. I don't care what you call it. It is an artificial interference with the natural function of the body, and is followed by a hangover. People would not drink wine at banquets if it were not a stimulant. I can see no practical difference between a stimulant and a drink that "loosens one's natural restraint and makes for pleasant social intercourse." Looks to me like playing with words. If there is a hangover, it is a stimulant so far as I am concerned. It may be that wine is more of a stimulant than whisky. But I am not greatly concerned about alcohol. I am content to leave that to the life insurance companies. I am concerned mainly with tea and coffee.

Any kind of stimulant is a form of dope. There is no food value in tea or coffee. The refreshing effect they produce is a trick. It is a draft on one's vitality and has to be paid for. As the traditional Scot is said to have remarked on one occasion: "You get naething for naething in this world, and dash little for saxpence." Food alone can provide the body with nourishment. But food is not immediately refreshing like tea or coffee. The nourishment has first to be assimilated before the refreshing feeling comes. In the interval one may feel a little drowsy, as after a meal. That is a natural process. One cannot even assimilate nourishment without having to pay for it with a temporary loss of energy. That tea and coffee, having no food value, should be able immediately to revive one's spirits, ought to be regarded as a very suspicious circumstance. Life is not so easy as that. One cannot create something out of nothing.

The man who "drinks" heavily in the evening expects to feel out of sorts and depressed the following morning. The consequence is inevitable. He would be greatly surprised if it were not there. It never seems to occur to the people who drink tea and coffee that their reluctance to get out of bed in the morning is due to precisely the same kind of cause. Reluctance to get out of bed in the morning is unnatural.

People ought to be able to rise without any difficulty and feel strong and fresh and clear-minded.

If it were possible to approach this question of sleeping and waking without knowledge of the common experience, as it were from another world, one would naturally expect this to happen. One would imagine the day shading off gradually from mornings of brightness and vigour to evenings of dullness and fatigue, with vigour subsequently regained during a peaceful sleep that would terminate as naturally and smoothly as it began. Reason left to itself could supply no other conception. Left to itself, reason would be completely puzzled to account for the batteries of alarm clocks and the agony of rising that the entire civilised world has come to regard as perfectly natural. Animals do not require alarm clocks and they do not oversleep themselves. Bed should

pull at least less in the morning than in the evening. Eight hours' sleep ought to produce some measure of satisfaction.

Yet this is what very few people find. In the evening sleep is generally regarded as an unpleasant necessity to be put off as long as possible. Even when convention or wisdom counsels rest, books and other contrivances have to be employed to encourage a condition the attainment of which ought to be as easy as the closing of the petals of a flower on the setting of the sun. Evenings have usurped the fine qualities of mornings. For most people evening is red; morning grey. It should be the other way about.

When I gave up drinking tea and coffee in Boston, I found that gradually my evenings became less rosy and my mornings less grey. My day swung round about and became more natural. Before then, all my visions had come in the evening and my depression in the morning. I can remember walking home from evening classes on dry winter nights at home, in my tea and coffee days, my mind aflame with projects I hoped to be able to carry out.

The carrying-out seemed quite simple in the evening; but the projects had all vanished in the morning or remained to jeer at me. In the morning the limit of my ambition was to catch my usual train, and that was never easy. Now my forenoons are the best part of my day. I waken with the birds. I do not require to be called.

My afternoons are scarcely so good. My evenings are of little value for writing or for reading that requires unusual concentration. I am usually asleep a few minutes after going to bed. Sleeplessness, except on very rare occasions and for reasons that I can always understand is unknown to me.

The amount of nonsense talked and written about sleeplessness by eminent physicians and others is enough to make one despair of the intelligence of mankind. The explanation of sleeplessness is very simple. Sleeplessness is due to drinking stimulants. When tea was first introduced into England it was advertised as a means of keeping people awake in the afternoon when they were feeling sleepy after a heavy meal. If people will drink tea or coffee at intervals

all day long, in some cases up to the moment of going to bed, how can they expect to sleep? But they drink tea or coffee to keep them awake and then take drugs to make them sleep, and those drugs can be harmful. It is sheer lunacy. The natural cure for sleeplessness is not to count sheep jumping over a fence or any other foolish remedy recommended by foolish people, but to cut out that last cup of tea or coffee. If that does not work, cut out the second last cup also. Better still, cut out them all. There will be no difficulty then in getting to sleep. The difficulty, for a time, will be to keep awake. Nature will insist on an adequate amount of sleep.

Since I gave up drinking tea and coffee my outlook on life has become more stable. There is no longer the mysterious difference between my mornings and my evenings that there used to be. What seems to me feasible in the evening seems feasible in the morning. I become tired, but my outlook does not change. I no longer have fits of depression that I cannot account for. Being human I am occasionally discouraged, very often because I insist on going my own way and not with the crowd. Like other people, I am occasionally made sad by circumstances in my environment. But I always know where I am. I estimate that the pleasure I get from life has been increased by at least fifty per cent. since I gave up drinking tea and coffee and, of course, other stimulants. I am not romancing. This is a plain statement of fact.

I am not moved by sentiment of any kind in this matter of drink. My attitude is purely selfish. I have signed no pledge. I am prepared to drink anything that will increase my happiness—increase it not merely at the moment, but over a test period. So far I have discovered nothing better than milk, with water a good second.

I drank milk or water when I was in the Army in the first world war, the milk supplied at my own expense. Occasionally milk was not obtainable, and at times I found it very uninteresting to drink cold water on cold days when the men about me were drinking warm tea, the taste of which I always liked. But my horror of the depression that follows

tea-drinking, after an interval, and the stiffness it engenders, to which I shall refer in a moment, was always strong enough to enable me to resist the temptation to touch it.

Once I tried the rum ration . I was prepared to swallow rum or anything else by the gallon if it would have done me any good. I never tried it again. It gave me a momentary glow and then left me colder, it seemed, than before, certainly as cold.

On the other hand, once in France, where I found milk difficult to obtain, we were each issued with five francs to account, and, by one of these coincidences that sometimes happen in the British Army, the Sergeant-Major's canteen had received a fresh supply of provisions on the same day. A tin of unsweetened condensed milk cost a franc and a quarter. I asked for one, but I had nothing less than five francs, and Sergeant-Major's canteens never had any change. So I bought four tins of condensed milk. I gave one away, and drank the other three, without dilution and without any unnecessary delay. For a good twelve hours afterwards I felt as if I could have fought the entire German Army single-handed, and that was a solid feeling of fitness with no depression to follow in the morning.

Bodily activity can be supplied only by honest fuel. To excite the body by stimulants so that it may give out little bursts of energy is to draw on one's capital. It would be as reasonable to imagine that one was very rich when spending borrowed money as it would be to imagine that the feeling of cheerfulness that follows stimulant drinking is a manifestation of real health.

If the morning reaction from the drinking of stimulants the previous day were allowed to exhaust itself naturally, no great harm might be done. I have never tried it, but I dare-say the damage would be negligible. A man would lie in bed until his mind was quite clear; until he felt that he wanted to get up; until he felt that it would be pleasanter to be up than to lie in bed. This would probably be about mid-day.

Each day would get rid of its own troubles. But business does not permit it. And so we have what an American humourist, with profound truth, once called an "artificial cut-off." The reaction has to be rudely interrupted at eight o'clock by a harsh alarm followed by generous doses of black coffee, and the tide of depression has to be kept dammed up by further doses of tea or coffee or something stronger at regular intervals. We come in time to the novelist who cannot work without the aid of stimulants, to the leader-writer who cannot phrase unless there is a recently emptied cup on his desk, to the eminent surgeon who will not begin an operation until there are a half a dozen cups of tea sitting in a row, waiting for him in the operating theatre.

When a writer feels more like sleeping than writing he ought to sleep. Nature is a sound guide in those matters. If the writer disregards the suggestion of Nature and carries on with the aid of another drink, he is overworking his nervous system and inviting a nervous breakdown. Overwork generally means overdrinking of some sort, over-stimulation. The man who does not use stimulants cannot easily overwork himself. He may do it for a day or two days, but sooner or later Nature will insist on his taking a rest, and he will be unable to disobey. He will then make up his arrears of sleep.

When I first gave up drinking tea and coffee I was at times tempted to go back to them in an emergency.

For a time I wrote theatre notices for an evening paper. I was supposed to hand my report to the sub-editor at nine o'clock in the morning. There were certain advantages in writing the notice in the evening immediately after seeing the play. The impressions were then fresh in my mind, and I had unlimited time. If I left it till the morning the opening sentence might be difficult to find, and in the end I might have to fight against the clock. There is always satisfaction in getting a definite task off one's mind. I should explain that the question presented itself only when the play was of some importance and I was writing a longer notice than usual.

Occasionally I had a cup of tea or coffee after the theatre and wrote my notice before going to bed. But the experiment

never proved satisfactory, and I finally abandoned it. The tea or coffee would keep me awake, usually until two or three o'clock in the morning, for I have become extraordinarily sensitive to the effects of stimulants since I gave up drinking them, but on these occasions I was awake to no good purpose.

My mind would be full of the play, but I found it hard work to get my impressions on to the paper. I felt as if my nerves, exposed to the light when they ought to have been in darkness, refused to work more than the stipulated ten hours. I seemed to have no creative power. On the other hand, when I wrote my notice in the morning I could work like a steam engine as soon as I found the opening sentence—always a difficulty with me.

Over-exposure of the nervous system through stimulant drinking is only half the evil. When the feeling of depression caused by previous drinking is chased away by tea or coffee it is not dissipated. It is still there in suspense ready to overwhelm the mind with the feeling of defeat as soon as it is released or can overflow the dam. The interruption of the daily tide of depression each morning by a cup of tea in bed, or by coffee at breakfast, tends to increase the pressure on the dam. The tide of depression steadily accumulates. There is a partial overflow on Monday mornings, known as the "Mondayish feeling," a feeling of which I have had no experience for over sixty years. The annual overflow of the dam occurs in late spring or early summer.

There are more suicides in late spring and early summer in Britain than in any other time of the year. May has been called the "suicide month." Newspapers sometimes comment on the fact when the returns are published, but they have not hitherto been able to supply the explanation. May as the suicide month is a striking phenomenon, another of the striking phenomena that are inexplicable except by Dr. Haig's theory.

Nietzsche, the German philosopher, said in a letter: "The history of my springs for the last fifteen years has been a history of horrors."

If the statistics were withheld from a jury, and they were invited to arrange the months of the year in order of their suicide figures, as they imagined them, beginning with the largest number, they would probably put December first and May last. Why should people commit suicide in May? The first month of Summer! The return of genial warmth after the cold dismal months of winter and spring! It cannot be regarded as a natural phenomenon. According to Dr. Haig it is not. It is due to the deferred depression consequent on stimulant drinking.

There is no sadder story in the newspapers than that of a man or woman who commits suicide for no particular reason. The inquest jury call it "temporary insanity." It is not insanity at all. But the jury are usually right in thinking that there was nothing in the dead man's circumstances to explain why he took his life. There may have been some trifling, transient discouragement; but the man has exaggerated it to himself and distorted it. A normal man would have dismissed it from his mind. But the man about to commit suicide is rarely normal. He is suffering from depression, the cause of which is purely physical and entirely within his own control.

It is physical, not mental. He is paying for earlier moments of an artificial cheerfulness, perhaps only a comparative cheerfulness. The blood is moving slowly through his brain. Trifles loom gigantic and overwhelming. If he understood his own case he would lie down and wait until his mind has cleared or partly cleared. But it never occurs to him that the trouble is inside himself. He thinks that it is in his environment. He invests his surroundings with a destructive purpose and imagines that he cannot bear it.

Dr. Haig explains that when tea or coffee clear the mind for a moment, the trouble is not got rid of; it has merely changed its location. The mind is cleared by driving the impurities from the blood, but the muscles are stiffened by having to afford these impurities refuge. The blood relieved of the impurities, circulates more freely through the brain, producing a feeling of cheerfulness; but the arms and legs, for