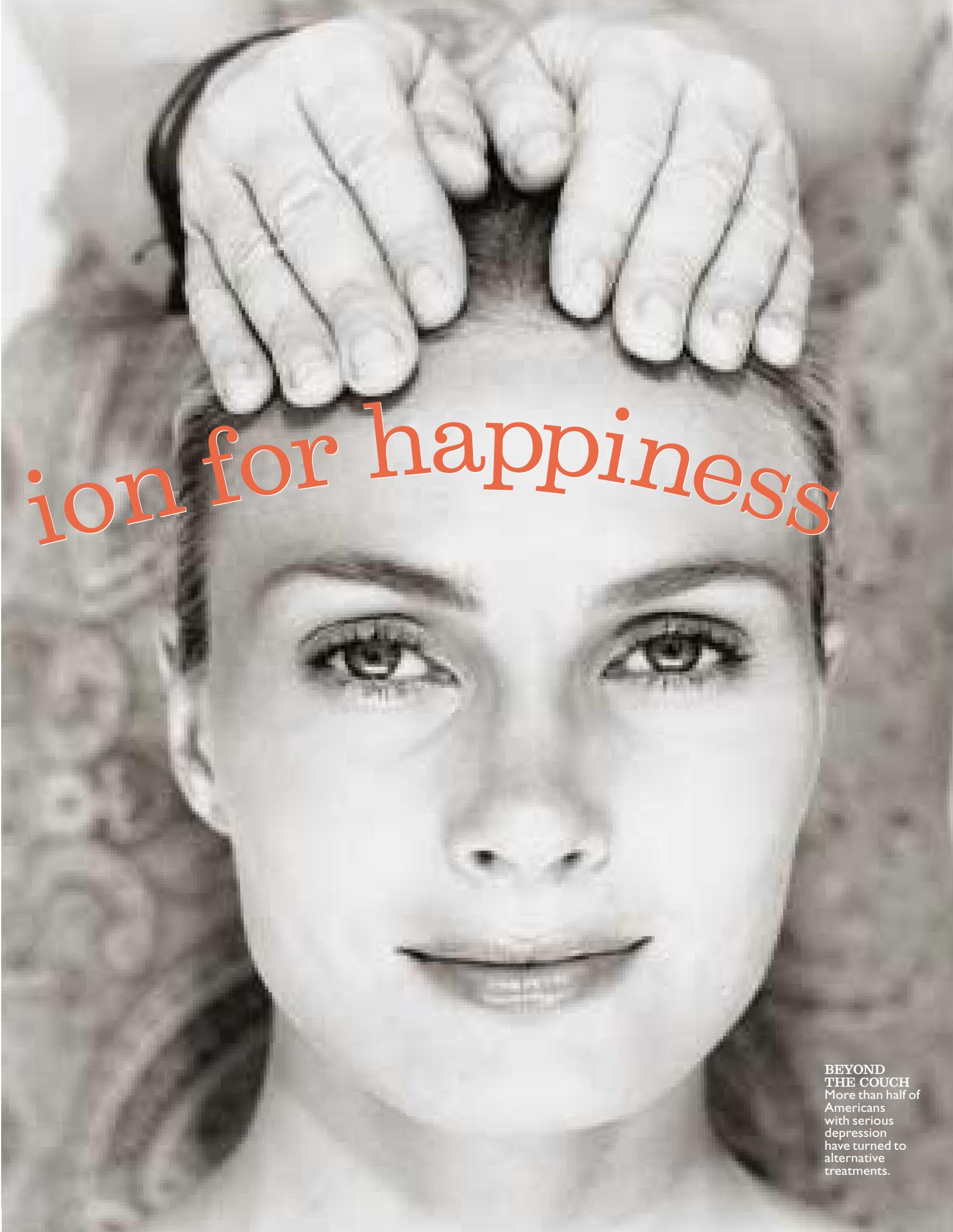




A new prescript

Could a chanting shaman or a ray of light help lift your mood? A mind-bending report on the latest drug-free blues fighters

By Deb Abramson Photographs by Jason Kibbler



ion for happiness

**BEYOND
THE COUCH**
More than half of
Americans
with serious
depression
have turned to
alternative
treatments.

I'm no New Age zombie.

I don't wear crystals, I didn't name my son Moonbeam and I don't really believe that if you put a jar of honey on my belly you can tell whether I have allergies, no matter how talented you are. But lately, I've been scanning the bulletin board at my small-town grocery store with great interest. It's plastered with ads for psychics and bodyworkers who—for a price—do things like talk to your muscles and drop flower essences onto your tongue.

I've been seeing psychotherapists off and on for 17 years, since I was 18, but bouts of depression still plague me—little pockets of deep despair tucked into an otherwise ordinary life. Antidepressants either make me giddy or leave me feeling flat, and though everyone assures me that better ones are on the way, I don't want to try drugs with no track record.

So I've begun to wonder: Is there an alternative, one that

won't require (please, not again!) exploring my feelings about my mother? According to a survey by the Harvard Medical School in Boston, more than 50 percent of Americans suffering from serious depression have turned to some form of alternative medicine for relief, with relaxation techniques such as meditation and spiritual healing (including semi-magical folk remedies like shamanism and the laying on of hands) topping the list. Some people, like me, have come up against the limits of mainstream approaches.

"Others are simply seeking treatments that focus on the whole human being," notes Victoria Maizes, M.D., executive director of the program in integrative medicine at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

Though the same survey found that people who have tried alternative treatments say these methods work about as well as conventional ones, some experts point out that few of the therapies have been tested in clinical trials. That's changing. In recent years, good studies have gotten under way, like one on acupuncture that is being conducted at both Stanford University in California and the University of Arizona; preliminary results suggest it can ease depression. Another, at the University of Louisville School of Medicine in Kentucky, found that women with cancer who consider spirituality important have more disease-fighting white blood cells than those who don't.

I decide I have nothing to lose. I stop by the bulletin board and scribble down some phone numbers. I'm ready to find out what these unconventional cures have to offer.

Reiki The best-laid hands

Reiki master Melanie Davis* is eating potato chips when I walk into her office; she brushes crumbs onto her pants

leg before shaking my hand. "I've lit some incense," she says. "I hope you don't mind." Maybe I'm mistaken, but it smells like pot to me. She's stoned, I think. My healer is stoned and she's got the munchies!

Stoned or not, Davis is definitely mellow. And over the course of the hour-long treatment, as I lie on my back and she rests her hands on my forehead, chest, belly and, strangely, my knee, I grow mellow, too. When I arrive, my brain is buzzing with worry, but almost immediately, I feel melded to the table, woozy. A kitten named Houdini swats at a ball while Davis works. A few times, I almost nod off.

Is this magic, I wonder?

"It's an energy transfer," Davis explains. Reiki (pronounced "ray-kee") is Japanese for universal life force, and it works on the theory that when the body's healthy flow of energy is disrupted, ailments such as depression or a bad cold can occur. Unlike a traditional masseuse, the Reiki practitioner keeps her hands light and still, using them to allow this universal life force—"love or God or whatever you want to call it," Davis says—to flow through her. "I'm like the straw. You are sucking the chocolate milk, or positive energy, through me," she explains. Afterward, I'm supposed to feel not only physically relaxed, but at peace.

Of course, we all know that touch can be calming. And a depressed person tends to have a higher level of the stress hormone cortisol; if she calms down, cortisol drops, and feelings of sadness may ease. But does this explain Davis's claim that Reiki worked on her plants? "They grew so fast, they got leggy," she says. I picture them climbing the walls, tall green stalks shooting toward heaven. Yet she seems

honest and looks me straight in the eye when she talks. Her fingers, when they touch me, have a surprising amount of heat, and I cannot decide what to believe.

After I leave, I feel relaxed for the rest of the evening. By morning, though, that peace of mind is gone. Davis warned me that while some patients feel transformed after one visit, others take longer. But the skeptic in me has a hard time buying that even a series of these sessions might add up to something enduring. Reiki, I conclude, is good while it lasts, but for me, apparently, it only lasts so long.

Shamanic healing The chanting cure

"Pray for a dream to help with the healing," shaman Susan Grimaldi tells me when I call for an appointment. But when I arrive, the only recent dream I can think of involves discovering a cocoon filled with maggots in my pubic hair. I decide not to mention it.

As we sit in Grimaldi's office, the walls adorned with masks and feathers and a collection of drums, I give her my story in a nutshell: I feel nervous for no apparent reason. I assume the worst of myself. Sometimes—too often—I fight the impulse to rear-end rude drivers on the road. Every

I no longer feel tired. In fact, I'm energized. I get into a light-sitting

few months, I go through a weeklong stretch during which I cry all day, then, when night comes, feel terrified of falling asleep. I also give her a quick sketch of my childhood: the pressure of my parents' wishes weighing on me; a sense, early on, of profound loss. As I talk, Grimaldi listens, lightly tapping a small drum now and again as though she can't wait to get started. She has the weathered hands of an old woman, the slouching posture of an awkward adolescent, the wide-open face of a small girl. I can't guess her age within 15 years. But I sense a wisdom about her, a stillness and focus despite her restless fingers. She is definitely odd, but my gut tells me I can trust her.

"OK," she says, when I finish. "Now I'll pray for the healing." She closes her eyes, beats her drum—louder and steadier now—and starts a free-form kind of chanting that sounds, as best I can gather, like a lilting mumble. I wait with my hands folded and my legs crossed, trying to appear as though this is something I do every day.

A few minutes later, she stops. "OK," she says again. "I've seen the healing. I'm ready."

Shamanism, whose history can be traced back thousands of years and has been linked to South American and Native American cultures, among others, centers on the belief that physical or

habit. I find myself craving it, and the serenity it seems to bring.

emotional trauma can steal pieces of the soul, leaving a person vulnerable to illness. The shaman's role is to help regain the patient's whole self by entering an altered state and retrieving those lost pieces, wherever they are. "The practitioner is a bridge between the spiritual and human condition," Grimaldi says matter-of-factly. "I look beyond this realm."

As for my case, she explains, "I'll need to find the bits that got snipped away because they were outside the ring of your parents' expectations." When she says this, I flash to the kitchen table in my childhood home, where perfect circles lay on a cookie sheet, ready for baking, the ragged scraps of dough left behind. Given how little I have told her about my past, I am amazed at how much she understands.

And so we begin. Fully clothed, I lie on a table piled high with brightly colored blankets. To the taped drumming and chanting of a Tuvan shaman (Tuva, I learn, is a republic near Mongolia), Grimaldi begins to literally pluck the depression out of me, presumably to make space for my wayward soul; I feel her fingers tugging gently at my chest. After several minutes, I notice I'm hungry. Is it all the room she has created inside of me or is it lunchtime?

Next, she goes out into the universe—without leaving my side, of course—to find my soul's missing pieces. Her journey lasts a few drumbeats (apparently, she travels at the speed

of light), and then she is blowing the discarded soul bits back into my body through my chest and the top of my head. Finally, her fingers lightly massaging my torso and scalp, she weaves everything back together. At that moment, a strange thing happens. I am lying flat, but I feel as if my entire body is contracting on the table, my knees bending toward my chest. And then the feeling disappears. "Well," Grimaldi says, when I tell her about it, "that's probably because you aren't used to having the whole of you inside your body. At first, it feels a little cramped."

Afterward, she informs me that because my soul has been successfully rewoven into my body, I shouldn't be surprised if my inner child announces herself, since she is home at last. Over the next few days, I wait for the urge to play jacks or jump into a mud puddle, but I don't experience the emotional about-face I'd hoped for. I seem to be the same old me. Still, I think my visit helps in more subtle ways.

Though I went to Grimaldi to escape talk therapy, her words are what stay with me. Weeks later, I remember



her description of a whole self, along with her sky-blue eyes, her attentiveness to my concerns, her willingness to travel to the ends of the earth in search of scraps of ether that are a part of me. In moments of doubt, I summon up her faith, both in the process and in me, and feel comforted. When I think about it, that makes sense. As crankish as shamanism sounds, well-known psychiatrist Jerome Frank, M.D., believes it isn't that far off from traditional psychotherapy. In both cases, there's a defined space in which the helping happens, a shared sense of the problem and how it might be fixed. Perhaps most important, there is a deep bond with someone who aims to help.

Oriental medicine East meets stressed

My *qi*, apparently, is out of whack. This is the exotic description my ho-hum depression gets from (Continued on page 216)

Get-it guide

PRESCRIPTION FOR HAPPINESS

Continued from page 181



Try tweed over a silk floral dress. Coat, Beth Bowley, \$385; Tootsies, 713-629-9990. Dress, Tibi, \$253; select Saks Fifth Avenue stores

FASHION

Page 38 Wildlife Works shirt, \$32; www.wildlifeworks.com. **Page 53** Paul Smith Women sweater, \$595; Barneys New York. Susan Isaak necklace, \$50; 877-904-1480. **Page 70** Champion top, \$32; www.championforwomen.com. Hard Tail pants, \$54; www.hardtailforever.com. **Page 78** Champion top, \$26; www.championforwomen.com. Keiko shorts, \$78; 888-KEIKO-NY. Puma shoes, \$70; www.puma.com. **Page 79** Speedo swimsuit, \$66, and goggles, \$13; www.speedousa.com. TYR Sport cap, \$9; 800-252-7878. **Page 80** Michael Stars tank top, \$24; www.michaelstars.com. Joe's pants, \$98; 212-391-5550. Monkey Hill chair, www.abchome.com. **Page 96** Max & Co. sweater, \$230; 866-662-9626. Underglam briefs, \$30; www.underglam.com. **Page 167** Luisa Beccaria cardigan, \$450, skirt, \$1,000, and belt, \$100; Linda Dresner, 212-308-3177. Moschino Cheap & Chic shoes, \$380; Marshall Field's, Chicago. **Page 174** Nike top, \$40; www.niketown.com. Adidas pants, \$50; www.adidas.com. **Page 176** Puma top, \$45, and boots, \$130; www.puma.com. Hard Tail pants, \$74; www.hardtailforever.com. **Page 177** Hard Tail top, \$30; www.hardtailforever.com. **Page 188** Hard Tail top, \$28; www.hardtailforever.com. Keiko shorts, \$78; 888-KEIKO-NY. **Page 189** Champion top, \$35; www.championforwomen.com. Keiko shorts, \$78; 888-KEIKO-NY. Adidas shoes, \$70; www.adidas.com. **Page 198** United Colors of Benetton coat, \$258; 800-535-4491. Oh! by Hannah sweater, \$395; Stacie, 203-422-0347. Claudie Pierlot pants, \$120; Barneys New York. Ralph Lauren Blue Label flats, \$195; www.polo.com. René Lezard jacket, \$890; Saks Fifth Avenue. Betseyville by Betsey Johnson sweater, \$190; www.betseyjohnson.com. Gap pants, \$50; 800-GAP-STYLE. L'Autre Chose boots, \$310; Bergdorf Goodman. **Page 199** MaxMara jacket, \$435; 310-286-0944. James Coviello top, \$470; Bagutta, 212-925-5216. Ralph Lauren Blue Label pants, \$298; www.polo.com. Inhabit turtleneck, \$318; 212-575-4643. Schumacher skirt, \$325; Debra's, 251-343-7463. Ralph Lauren boots, \$650; www.polo.com. On him: Polo by Ralph Lauren sweater, \$265, and hooded pullover, \$450; 888-475-7674. Tommy Hilfiger pants, \$135; 888-TOMMY-4-U. **Page 200** Luisa Beccaria jacket,

\$1,240, and dress, \$4,600; Linda Dresner, 212-308-3177. Anya Hindmarch boots, \$595; 800-550-ANYA. **Page 201** Cacharel coat, \$605; Kirna Zabête, 212-941-9656. Helena Stuart for Only Hearts bra, \$42, and boy shorts, \$31; 212-431-3694. **Page 202** Ralph Lauren Blue Label jacket, \$425, and boots, \$750; www.polo.com. Maria Bianca Nero halter, \$168; Abejas, 713-522-3025. MaxMara skirt, \$200; 212-674-1817. Ralph Lauren Blue Label sweater, \$185; www.polo.com. James Coviello skirt, \$330; by special order at 212-695-8082. Kors Michael Kors boots, \$395; 212-966-5880. James Coviello sweater, \$285; Ransom & Izzy, 231-526-8550. Moschino Cheap & Chic top, \$390, and pants, \$430; select Saks Fifth Avenue stores. L'Autre Chose boots, \$310; Bergdorf Goodman. Tracy Reese turtleneck sweater, \$128; Studio Chaos, 201-459-9900. James Coviello pants, \$550; Ransom & Izzy, 231-526-8550. L.L. Bean shoes, \$59; 800-809-7057. Moschino Cheap & Chic sweater, \$430; select Nordstrom stores. Schumacher pants, \$320; Butch Blum, 206-622-5760. L.L. Bean boots, \$109; 800-809-7057. Eugenia Kim hat, \$180; 212-673-9787. Express cardigan, \$78; 877-415-4551. Boss Hugo Boss turtleneck, \$495; 212-485-1800. Holland & Holland stockings, \$85; www.hollandandholland.com. D&G sweater, \$290; Armoire, 915-532-7960. Holland & Holland socks, \$40; www.hollandandholland.com. **Page 203** MaxMara sweater, \$255; 866-MAX-MARA. Moschino Cheap & Chic dress, \$635; select Saks Fifth Avenue stores. Camper boots, \$230; www.camper.com. **Page 204** Megan Park jacket, \$1,025; Erica Tanov, 510-849-3331. Express top, \$50; 877-415-4551. Ralph Lauren Blue Label skirt, \$245; www.polo.com. Bruno Frisoni boots, \$980; Gregory's, 972-490-1285. **Page 205** Burberry London coat, \$625, cape, \$325, and skirt, \$385; select Burberry stores. City DKNY sweater, \$65; select Macy's stores. On him: Tommy Hilfiger sweater, \$225, and pants, \$135; 888-TOMMY-4-U.

Page 207 New Scotland sweater, \$262; Intoto, 612-822-2414. Fal by Jeffrey Grubb skirt, \$250; www.falny.com. Hogan boots, \$645; 888-60-HOGAN.

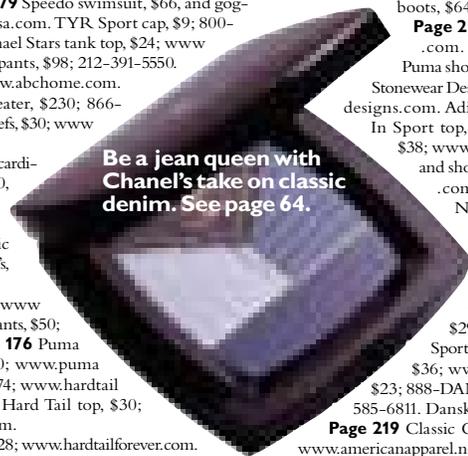
Page 212 Nike top, \$40; www.niketown.com. Sugo shorts, \$40; 800-432-1335. Puma shoes, \$90; www.puma.com. **Page 214** Stonewear Designs sports bra, \$35; www.stoneweardesigns.com. Adidas pants, \$55; www.adidas.com. In Sport top, \$40; 800-652-5200. Nike shorts, \$38; www.niketown.com. Champion top, \$35, and shorts, \$25; www.championforwomen.com. Prana top, \$36; 800-557-7262. Nike pants, \$60; www.niketown.com. Everlast tank, \$30; www.everlast.com. Avia pants, \$36; 888-855-AVIA. Everlast tank, \$28; www.everlast.com. Speedo pants, \$25; www.speedousa.com. Avia tank, \$29; 888-855-AVIA. Lady Foot Locker Sport shorts, \$20; 800-877-5239. Nike top, \$36; www.niketown.com. Danskin shorts, \$23; 888-DANSKIN. Jockey Sport top, \$32; 800-585-6811. Danskin pants, \$32; 888-DANSKIN.

Page 219 Classic Girl by American Apparel top, \$16; www.americanapparel.net. Levi's jeans, \$65; 800-USA-LEVI.

BEAUTY

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Page 53 Chantecaille, www.neimanmarcus.com. Completely Bare, www.completelybare.com. **Page 56** Dermanew, 866-44-DERMA. Philosophy, www.philosophy.com. Lush, www.lush.com. Ling, 888-815-LING. Neova, www.procyte.com. Arcona, www.arcona.com. Frédéric Fekkai, 888-F-FEKKAI. Julie Baker, 877-219-1323. Colette Malouf, 888-898-8286. **Page 58** L'Occitane, 888-623-2880. Bliss, 888-BLISS-OUT. **Page 64** StriVectin-SD, 800-898-5153. **Page 182** Lorac, www.loracosmetics.com. **Page 184** Becoming, www.becoming.com. MAC, 800-387-6707. **Page 186** Avon, 888-577-AVON. Sue Devitt, www.suedevittstudio.com.



Be a jean queen with Chanel's take on classic denim. See page 64.

MARK GIVEAWAY RULES

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oriental medicine practitioner Blake Gould, who is seated across from me at an oak table that looks like an antique schoolteacher's desk. In oriental medicine, he explains, physical and emotional health depend on a balance of energy, or qi (pronounced "chee"); any imbalance can lead to sickness. The practitioner "evaluates and adjusts fields of energy so that physical and psychological functioning conform to healthy patterns," says Gould, who looks professional in a shirt and tie with a pen poking out of his pocket. But there is also dirt under his nails. I imagine him digging in a garden somewhere, planting seeds, yanking herbs from the earth.

Gould talks at length about yin-yang and the Five Transformations, which have to do with the "energetic interactions" between fire, earth, metal, water and wood. Frankly, I find it all a bit confusing. Then he reviews my answers to a questionnaire I'd filled out about my health, diet, mood and more. (Do I suffer from headaches? Can I describe my relationship with my parents? My husband?)

He takes my pulse, explaining that he is feeling for the strength of the beats and how close they are to the surface of my skin. His conclusion: I struggle with a sense of "stuckness." There is too much going on in my brain; I am deficient in "quiet, inward energy." I also have a "weakness of nutrient assimilation," meaning, essentially, that my blood sugar levels are all over the place. Given my answers to the questionnaire, Gould mostly blames my sugar-heavy diet for my bouts of depression. First and foremost, to keep my glucose levels (and emotions) on an even keel, I must eat more whole grains, root vegetables and squash and cut down on bread, sugar and flour products. I can't argue with that. He also suggests I learn stress-management techniques such as visualization and various stretches and that I try acupuncture and shiatsu massage. I like the way his prescription makes me responsible for my own health. But when I leave his office and get back into my life, that responsibility begins

to feel like a burden. I quickly return to my old ways: sugar here and there, my attempts at deep breathing quickly aborted. It turns out part of me yearns not to achieve responsibility but to relinquish it, to hand myself over, to be a patient on a table, being treated.

Bright-light therapy: A good lux charm?

The sun is a dangerous star. We stare at it too long and damage our retinas; we lie out in it and our skin blisters and ages. But the sun is also a mood enhancer. There is some evidence that it gets the spirit-lifting neurotransmitter serotonin flowing and puts the brakes on the production of melatonin, a brain chemical that can make us feel sluggish. Deprive people of sunlight and they may develop a form of depression known as seasonal affective disorder, or SAD.

Bright-light therapy has long been prescribed to alleviate SAD, but there have also been promising studies that suggest it works with nonseasonal depression. The process, I learn, is relatively easy: You sit in front of a light box that

delivers 10,000 lux (a measurement of the brightness of light as it falls on the eye) for 30 minutes each morning.

My light box arrives on a gray day. I have chosen the desk lamp version so I can work while being blasted with rays of pseudo sunshine. I turn it on,

sit before it and go about my business.

Later that evening, I realize the sluggishness I associate with depression has left my limbs; the scratchy, fuzzy feeling around my eyes has disappeared. I no longer feel tired. In fact, I am energized. I get into a *(Continued on page 218)*

Tracking down the treatments

Reiki To find a practitioner skilled in this gentle form of touch therapy, which can help promote relaxation and ease pain, contact the International Association of Reiki Professionals (603-881-8838; www.iarp.org) for a referral. Cost for a 60- to 90-minute session: \$75 (all prices vary according to location).

Shamanic healing (aka shamanic journeying or soul retrieval) There's no official organization for this several-thousand-year-old type of spiritual healing, which is thought to help treat problems stemming from physical or emotional trauma. The best way to find a healer is by word of mouth; check a local integrative health center or www.shamanism.org for more information. Cost for a 90-minute session: \$125.

Oriental medicine This is a blanket term for a discipline that encompasses multiple approaches—herbal medicine, acupuncture, massage—to treat a wealth of ailments, including pain, stress and digestive problems. Contact the American Association of Oriental Medicine (www.aaom.org) for information and a referral. Cost for an initial one- to two-hour evaluation: \$110.

Bright-light therapy Light boxes can help combat depression, seasonal affective disorder and, in some cases, bulimia and premenstrual syndrome. (They won't, however, give you a tan.) Find them online (www.sunbox.com or www.northern-light-tech.com) for \$200 to \$525. No M.D. is required for this treatment, but be sure your light box generates 10,000 lux, and follow instructions carefully.—D.A.

PRESCRIPTION FOR HAPPINESS

Continued from page 217

light-sitting habit. When my 11-month-old's erratic nap schedule keeps me from spending a half hour under the box, I find myself craving it, along with the clarity of thought and serenity it seems to bring.

And yet, though this treatment is the most immediately successful, something is lacking. The light is very bright and warm—but also surprisingly industrial. I had imagined that it would transport me to some tropical locale; instead, I feel as if I might be in surgery.

Of all the so-called alternative treatments I've tried, this one brings me closest to Western science. There's biochemistry behind it, the endorsement of experts in white coats. But it occurs to me that science is not what attracts me. I'm not sure I would return to any of the healers I visited, but part of me misses the heat from Melanie Davis's hands, the plucking of Susan Grimaldi's fingers and the bullfroglike chanting of the shaman on her tape, the dirt under Blake Gould's fingernails. I long for all that murkiness and mystery.

And I suspect I'm not the only one. In an age in which imaging technology can reveal the patterns of activity in a depressed person's brain—a patch of red here, splotches of green there—many of us are yearning for the less precise kind of magic these healers offer. We don't want the capsule stamped with the imprint of this or that pharmaceutical company. We want something more natural, more obscure: an herb, perhaps, smelling a bit like the earth. After all, we are not machines but people. While I'm not wholly ready to take the leap of faith these nontra-

ditional therapies require, I think believing in something matters at least as much as hard evidence. Somehow, faith must enter into the transaction. We want to be healed, not just cured. I am still looking for a treatment that offers this divine combination, but I don't consider my exploration a bust. If anything, traveling to a universe built on energy fields and chanting has made me more optimistic about eventually finding the right kind of help. This help may come from a treatment I have yet to discover, or a 40-minute-hour therapist I have yet to meet, or both. Whatever it is, I know it's out there.

Deb Abramson is the author of the memoir Shadow Girl (University of Iowa Press).

Getting the most from alternative therapies

Are you considering trying something off the beaten path to lighten your spirits? First, follow this advice:

1. Don't ditch your regular doc

Many alternative strategies haven't been widely tested, so experts suggest using them to supplement, not replace, conventional prescriptions, particularly if you're severely depressed. And it makes sense to keep your M.D. apprised of any complementary treatments you receive.

2. Do your homework—then trust your gut

Ask for a practitioner's credentials, but use your intuition as your guide. "If you feel that person is a genuine healer and is there for you, he or she may be helpful no matter what," says James Gordon, M.D., founder of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine in Washington, D.C. (By the same token, if the treatment just feels wrong, stop going.)

3. Pay as you go

Be wary of practitioners who ask for a long-term financial commitment up front.—D.A.

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