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**Volume #: 57**

**Holy Basil (*Ocimum sanctum*)**

*Part II*



## **Part II: Clinical Patterns and Uses**

### **1. Stress, Melancholy, and Nervous Tension**

Holy Basil has an affinity for the nervous system and supports it in numerous ways. Firstly, it is an adaptogen. This is obviously a really popular plant property these days, but it's unfortunately commonly misunderstood. Not all adaptogens work the same way, and certainly not all are "adrenal herbs." I like to think of Holy Basil as a nervous system oriented adaptogen, helping it become more resilient to stress factors and respond with less intensity when stimuli arise. This is not a stimulating adaptogen like some of the Ginsengs, Eleuthero, or Rhodiola can produce, so it's not as likely to be misused, but nonetheless it's good to make sure you match the indications in the person to the plant. In this case, I think of Holy Basil as great for someone that hasn't quite yet reached the level of total burnout yet... rather they are on their way to it, their nervous system hypersensitive, wired, and yet their mentally fatigued.

The medicine of adaptogens is that they help you make positive and healthy changes in your life by decreasing your stress response. Using Holy Basil in this way, it can be a conduit for

healing by giving you the calm energy you need to develop lifestyle habits that replenish you and build a healthier future- but you can't expect the herb to do all the work for you! I always say, "you have to meet the remedy half-way and do your own work."

Holy Basil is a nervine relaxant and soothes nervousness and mental tension. This makes it helpful for tightly wound people who struggle to let go and feel distressed or preoccupied with excess thinking. You can use Holy Basil to help you meditate, focus at work, or decrease stress throughout the day. Another way Holy Basil benefits the mind is through its nootropic action, which describe an herb's ability to increase blood flow to the brain and improve cognition. Holy Basil's nootropic action works by reducing excessive nervous tension, calming the nerves, and increasing circulation to the brain. In this way, it lessens the cognitive load and the impact stress has on the mind, while encouraging its healthy functioning through its circulatory effects. Holy Basil is a good nootropic for people who have a hard time remembering things because they are burned out and feeling frazzled (wind/tension), or they have intense brain fog (cold/depression or damp/stagnation) that generates a feeling of grogginess and hard time focusing. The combination of its nervine relaxant and nootropic actions explains its long-standing use as a meditation aid.

We can consider this damp/cold brain fog state to be a sort of manifestation of depression or melancholy, for which this plant is particularly remedial. Not only through its influence on the stress response, nerves, and brain circulation, but also in its influence on the TCM Liver. David Winston notes, "I use holy basil as an antidepressant for "stagnant depression." The term *stagnant depression* is one that I coined, and it describes a specific type of situational depression. In this case, some type of traumatic event occurred in a person's life, and because he is unable to on, his life comes to revolve around the trauma.<sup>1</sup>" Interestingly, in TCM it's said that the Liver is associated with many emotional problems, especially those that tend to cling on and not let go; like the person simply doesn't have the skills to cope with their emotions. This is precisely the pattern that Holy Basil is working on, perhaps by relieving Liver qi stagnation.

I'd like to stress that to have a plant that is equally stimulating to brain circulation as well as calming and relaxant on the nerves is a truly supportive action that you really need to experience yourself to appreciate! That said, we must keep in consideration the energetics here, remembering that this is a warming/drying/relaxant plant. So it's really best for people that **show cold signs** in conjunction with these other indications. If someone is overly hot, irritable, and agitated, I would avoid Holy Basil as it can overheat them.

The overall energy this plant is very upwards and outwards in its directional movement, the same way that Fire moves. So you want to see a *lack of that upward movement* in the clients you consider giving it to. Otherwise it can do what it does to me, which is make me super ungrounded, spaced out, and sometimes even agitated (if I'm having a particularly "hot" day). This is why some people really do not prefer Holy Basil, and why some people absolutely *love it*.

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<sup>1</sup> Winston, David and Maimes, Steven. *Adaptogens: Herbs for Strength, Stamina, and Stress Relief*. Healing Arts Press. Rochester, Vermont. 2007. Page 170

Holy Basil has a long-standing traditional usage for supporting the soul. Chinese medicine recognizes the *shen*, which is the mind or spirit. Another way you can think about it is as the spirit that connects the mind and heart (though in Chinese Medicine the mind really *is* the heart). Grief, heartbreak, or chronic stress can disturb the *shen*, leading to physical heart conditions and mental health imbalances like anxiety or depression. It is during these times that you would want to use Holy Basil. With its ability to break through energetic muck and heaviness while uplifting and connecting you to your spirit, Holy Basil is a profound Heart medicine. (This is more the TCM concept of heart rather than the physical heart).

Ayurvedically, Holy Basil decreases an excess of *vata* and *kapha*. When *vata* is elevated, there is often excess thought, a feeling of ungrounding, and anxiety. Alternatively, elevated *kapha* can lead to feelings of depression in the mind and body. With its balancing effects on both constitutions, Holy Basil is a beloved herb for anxiety, depression, general nervous tension, and stress.

## **2. Insulin Resistance and Diabetes**

As mentioned above under the adaptogenic property, Holy Basil has been shown both through scientific studies and clinical evidence to be highly supportive for insulin resistance and type II diabetes. At their core, these are metabolic disorders, that actually have their root in the liver (of course diet and lifestyle are at the true core, but physiologically the liver governs metabolism). This is because the liver is one of the first parts of the body to get insulin resistant, as its actively storing excess sugars in the form of glycogen and ones those reserves are full, converting it into fat for longer term energy storage. This is why also associated with the insulin resistance pattern is often times hepatic steatosis (fatty liver), elevated triacylglycerol (triglycerides/fat), and LDL cholesterol. This ultimately places a lot of stress, stress, and in the long term, inflammation and oxidative damage to the liver. It's interesting to note that a study showed Holy Basil is highly antioxidant and protective to the liver from oxidative stress via reducing lipid peroxidation (basically fats going rancid) by increasing SOD (superoxide dismutase) and superoxide catalase. It's also shown to help reduce excessive cholesterol levels.

So we see Holy Basil supporting this pattern in a variety of ways. For one, it's been shown to help reduce blood sugar levels, the postulation is that it is enhancing cellular sensitivity to the binding of insulin, helping the cellular gating channels to open and bring sugar into the cell from the blood. Second, as noted above, it's supporting liver metabolism and hepatoprotective.

The last important point is the stimulant property. When blood sugar levels are high, the blood itself becomes more thick, congealed, and sticky, which then congests the smaller blood vessels and capillary beds. This is why many diabetics have vision impairment, and at its most extreme, wind up with lower limb amputation due to necrosis. Tulsi is supportive here as it's helping to drive and stimulate the flow of blood to the periphery and the surface.

Energetically, the insulin resistance is notably cold and damp for the most part. There can be reflex heat and inflammation, but at its core there is usually damp/stagnation and cold/



depression. As a nicely warming and drying plant, Holy Basil is a good antipathetic remedy for the energetic pattern underneath this pervasive and very common condition.

### **3. Tense, Cold and Stagnant Digestion**

Holy Basil benefits the digestive system when there are patterns of cold, tension, and stagnation. Looking at this herb's taste alone, Holy Basil is pungent, bitter, and sweet. Its pungency lends it a warming and circulatory stimulant action that ushers circulation to the entire digestive system, revitalizing it when there is hypoactivity and slow, sluggish digestion.

The volatile oil compounds lend Holy Basil its carminative effect. Carminatives are herbs that have circulatory stimulant and antispasmodic properties with an affinity for the digestive system. Through improving the blood flow in the digestive system, Holy Basil strengthens the *agni*, the digestive fire, and stimulates the entire digestive process. With its antispasmodic action, Holy Basil lessens tension, bloating, and gas in the digestive system. With its relaxant energetics, it is helpful for intestinal cramping and pain associated with excess tension in the tissues or system.

Lastly, Holy Basil's bitter taste increases digestive secretions, such as bile, HCL, and enzymes that help your body break down, digest, assimilate, and eliminate fats, oils, and rich food. The bitter taste lends this herb a draining and drying property, making it helpful for patterns of damp/stagnation in the digestive system that can lead to constipation, nausea, slow digestion, and distention after meals. That said, to me Holy Basil isn't *that* bitter, so I don't really think of it much as a bitter at all honestly.

### **4. Phlegmatic Respiratory and Febrile Conditions**

Holy Basil is a relaxant diaphoretic herb that gently raises the body temperature, dilates tense capillary beds, and opens the pores to help your body break a fever. Relaxant diaphoretics like Holy Basil are indicated when someone has a fever with a lot of mental and physical tension, which you can see through irritation, writhing in bed, and an inability to find comfort. But it's also so warming that it has a bit of a stimulant diaphoretic property as well, so I find it best for when someone has alternating chills and fever, but feels cold.

Since Holy Basil possesses anti-viral, anti-bacterial, and inflammation-modulating compounds, it is a valuable herb for not only the febrile mechanism, but the immune system as a whole. Its warming, drying, and relaxant energetics make it helpful for upper respiratory conditions or coughs that are tense and phlegmatic. By warming the respiratory tract, thinning the mucus, and relaxing the tissues, Holy Basil encourages a productive cough and helps you expectorate phlegm. This property also exists in the more upper reaches of the respiratory system, including the sinuses and throat. It helps drain phlegm from the sinuses, ease a scratchy irritated throat, especially from post nasal drip, and dries up all that moisture. Some people have even used it as a snuff to clear the sinuses, but that's probably not a very pleasant sensation... I've found the tincture or a nice hot infusion works fine for this purpose.

This makes it applicable for many respiratory route infections, but you'll want to make sure you don't see too many heat signs (yellow mucous is a key one). The mucous should be clear or white in color and difficult to expectorate, the person should feel chilly, and show signs of dampness.

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This completes the Clinical Patterns for working with Holy Basil holistically. As you can see, this is a much more comprehensive method for understanding how to apply a plant therapeutically than just knowing the superficial symptoms it's "good for." These clinical patterns, coupled with the Five Keys, are the secret key to effective administration of herbal medicines.

But once again, this isn't quite enough! There are essential things you have to know about every plant you work with in order to effectively use it, such as its safety profile so you don't hurt anyone, its best preparations so you use the right form of extract, how to formulate with it, and even its psycho-spiritual properties.

All that and more is coming to you in Part III of the monograph. So keep an eye on your inbox for a special link when it's ready for you.