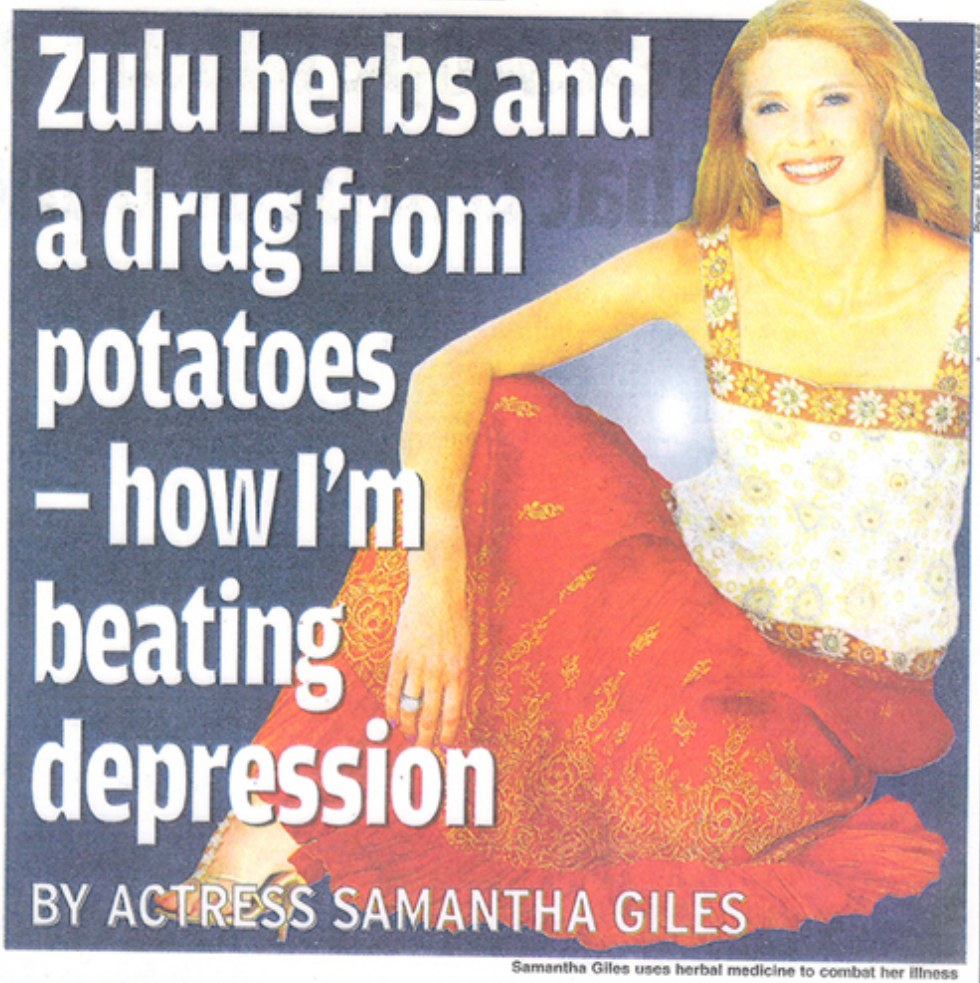
Zulu herbs and a drug from potatoes – how I'm beating depression

BY ACTRESS SAMANTHA GILES



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Samantha Giles uses herbal medicine to combat her illness

BETWEEN five and ten per cent of the population suffer from depression at some time in their lives. Emmerdale and Where The Heart Is actress Samantha Giles, 33, is among them. Here, Samantha who is single and lives in Windsor, Berkshire, tells SUE COCKER how she has learned to cope with her depression.

THE ringing of the phone cut through the silence of the house. Part of me wanted to answer it to see if it was a friend ringing, or my agent calling about an audition.

Another part of me couldn't be bothered. I'd recently left the TV series Emmerdale, where I played landlady and vicar's wife Bernice Thomas for three years. I should have been on the crest of a wave, but I felt completely bereft.

Since my late teens, I've suffered from depression, and my attempts to hide away from the outside world like that are a sure sign of its return. When it happens, I know it's time to take a grip of my depression again, before it gets a grip of me.

It first reared its head in my late teens and early 20s. I'd graduated from Bristol University, where I had studied drama and English, and was desperately trying to get my first acting break.

Although most people love their first time away from home, I absolutely hated it. A girl in my halls of residence bullied me throughout my time there, seeming to get a kick out of putting me down.

I was quite a young 18-year-old, brought up in a close-knit family in Windsor, and it was a shock to learn that not all people are so friendly and warm.

When I left university and moved to London to pursue my acting career, my confidence hit rock bottom. I lived in a shared house, and in between going through endless rounds of failed auditions I paid my way doing cleaning, ironing and waitressing jobs.

The jobs meant I was spending huge chunks of time on my own, and this, coupled with the lack of family support around me, made me feel very alone. I thrived on human contact, and to be isolated like that was awful.

My depression spiralled down and down until, at its worst, I didn't want to get out of bed. I wouldn't wash and couldn't eat — I just wanted to shut myself away.

I'd sit and stare into space for hours, unable to move. I didn't want to eat. All I wanted was to curl up into a ball in a dark room and not wake up.

ALTHOUGH I never saw my GP, I knew I was suffering from depression. I was brought up to believe that you don't go to the doctor unless there is something seriously wrong with you.

I thought that if I could get through it without counselling or antidepressants, I would.

A lot of people who haven't suffered from depression don't think it exists. They think you are in self-pity mode and should snap out of it, but it's as if you are in a dark tunnel, with no way out.

A feeling of hopelessness envelops you and it seems there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

At times, it seemed the only way to feel better was to take myself out of this life. I knew in my heart of hearts that I would never commit suicide, but it didn't stop the feelings of: 'What else can I do?'

Luckily, my mum was brilliant. Some days she would try to cajole me out of my depression, other days she would take a hard approach, dragging me out to face the world.

Instead of seeing my GP, I tried to cure my depression by other means. During my first bout, and when I felt low after leaving Emmerdale and the break-up of my marriage to my ex-husband Nick, I took up yoga and meditation. Just concentrating on my breathing going in and out helped me feel much calmer.

Not only was I exercising myself on the outside, but I felt as if I was exercising myself on the inside, too.

As well as exercise, I've discovered herbal medicine as a way of treating illness and depression.

When I found myself getting very tired and my metabolism became sluggish, my friend Deena Payne, who plays Viv Windsor in Emmerdale, recommended a herbal medicine called Simba.

Simba, translated in African as 'strength', comes from an African potato tuber, and has been used by generations of people in Southern Africa to cleanse the body and bring relief from colds and flu.

The tuber is exceptionally high in plant 'fats' which are needed for a healthy immune system, but sadly lacking in most people's diets because of over-processed foods.

Through the Little Herbal Company, which produces Simba, I have recently discovered a new herbal antidepressant which is being launched, called Filisa. The name is taken from the Zulu for 'to make better'.

Filisa is extracted from a plant called *Sutherlandia*, which was used by the wives of slain Zulu warriors to ease their grief.

The warriors who survived also took it to help calm them after their experiences.

I've taken it regularly when I've felt low and stressed out, and it really makes a difference. I feel as if I can deal with anything that life throws at me. I feel so calm.

At the moment I'm taking it because I'm not feeling great.

Even now I have to watch myself. Depression is something which is constantly around me, and I have to be careful that I don't start sliding into it again.

I try not to give in to it, which is easier said than done.

Some days I let myself have a good cry, then on other days I say to myself: 'You're going to go out and make an effort.'

Being able to talk to people really helps, although I find picking up the phone when I get down can be incredibly hard.

Knowing there is medication which can get me through does give me a new light at the end of the tunnel.

How to spot the warning signs

THE number of children with depression has increased by 70 per cent in the past 20 years — and one in five teenagers now suffers. Child psychotherapist Carol Hughes, who works for the Brookside clinic in Cambridge, is co-author of So Young, So Sad, a book aimed at parents, telling them how best to help. Here, she gives her ten top tips . . .

1. KNOW what to look for. Young children who are depressed will tend to be irritable and lose interest in everyday life. Things they enjoyed will no longer excite them. They withdraw from social and family life.

2. LISTEN to them properly. Unplug the phone, sit in a quiet room and ask them to tell you how they feel. That way, your child knows that you do not see their problems as a burden.

3. DO NOT recount your own experiences to a depressed child — it will just burden them. Rather, reflect back what your child tells you ('Oh, so you feel like this . . .') to keep the conversation going.

4. ASK them open questions about their feelings, rather than questions that can be answered by a simple yes or no. 'Tell me about your sadness' will illicit more than: 'Do you feel sad?'

5. WITH children under ten, encouraging them to show how they feel using toys or drawings can be more productive than talking about their feelings.

6. DO NOT allow them to withdraw from family life. Tell them how much all of the family would like them to join in mealtimes, a special day out etc.

7. CHALLENGE negative thought patterns. If a child says 'I have no friends', then use examples that prove they do have friends. For example: 'Tom asked you to tea last week, so he clearly likes you'.

8. DO NOT tell a depressed child to cheer up, as this will belittle their feelings. Instead, offer hope. Assure them that their feelings will eventually pass, and that professional help is available. Under current guidelines, GPs should offer drug treatments or counselling.

9. MAINTAIN physical contact. Depressed teenagers may seem stand-offish, but they are probably yearning for the occasional cuddle.

10. OFFER practical help to change whatever brought on the depression. Bullying is a common cause and increasingly happens by text or e-mail.

■ *So Young So Sad, £7.50, is available from The Royal College of Psychiatrists, tel 020 7235 2351; www.rcpsych.ac.uk/publications*

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