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## What happened when I took a brain-boosting herbal supplement for a month

I got smarter (sort of), but it certainly wasn't a cure-all.

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BY LYDIA DISHMAN 5 MINUTE READ

“Brain,” the dark glass jar read, alongside a shortlist of benefits including “mood-lifting,” “mental clarity,” and “anxiety-reducing.” The container was filled with a powdery blend of adaptogens that promised to make me a happier, calmer, and smarter version of myself if I just mixed a bit of this magic powder into my water, juice, or coffee every day. I was about to find out if it worked.

Adaptogens are a blend of medicinal mushrooms and herbs that allegedly work with your body to tackle a variety of imbalances and ailments. Put simply, “Adaptogens help your body handle stress,” says [Dr. Brenda Powell](#), co-medical director of the Center for Integrative and Lifestyle Medicine at the Cleveland Clinic’s Wellness Institute.

Although these mushrooms and herbs have been used in Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine for centuries, they are having a buzzworthy moment now. So when I read the ingredients of this jar, I did so with the eye of someone who’s been sucked in (and subsequently swindled) by trendy remedies that purport to cure a laundry list of common complaints (stress, breakouts, low energy) but fail to significantly improve any of them. I was skeptical enough to think this was just another 21st-century version of what “doctors” peddled in the 1800s to deal with ills like dyspepsia and dropsy.

That hasn't stopped others from [jumping on this latest cure-all](#). As my colleague [Rina Raphael observed](#) earlier this year, there's a 'shroom boom in progress. The medicinal mushroom market is growing like a fungus as consumers flock to add "functional foods" to supplement their diets. According to [Grand View Research](#), demand for mushroom extracts is estimated to grow 6.3%, or in excess of \$50 billion by 2022.

No wonder companies like [Southern Pressed Juicery created Wildcrafted](#), a business aimed at creating custom versions of adaptogenic compounds like the one I was about to try.

## **SWALLOWING SKEPTICISM**

So for the sake of reporting, I swallowed my skepticism along with the blend of lion's mane, eleuthera, rhodiola, and holy basil (tulsi). Every morning for the past 30 days, even before I had my coffee, I carefully measured out a quarter teaspoon of coriander-scented powder and swirled it into a glass of water. I gulped it down, making sure I caught all the dregs with an extra splash of water, and went about my morning routine.

At first, I didn't feel any noticeable difference in my mood or brain power. Things were chugging along as usual. Anxiety about common things like deadlines and financial uncertainty weren't mitigated in any significant way.

Around day four, I started reading about the individual ingredients and diving deeper into the research around each. As my fellow reporter Raphael noted in her piece, the medical community was as skeptical as I was, based on the lack of significant clinical trials.

I was gratified to see that the mushroom lion's mane (*Hericium erinaceus*) was backed by some academic research, most notably for its ability to promote nerve growth. As such, it's been [cited in research](#) surrounding Alzheimer's patients, a small set of [30 post-menopausal women](#), and experiments on lab mice. In each, the [outcomes were positive](#) (the women experienced a reduction of depression and anxiety), but the sample was so small, it's statistically not significant.

The other ingredients weren't as proven. Golden root, or rhodiola, for instance, was studied by Russian researchers for years, in an attempt to prove the herb would help Russian soldiers and athletes enhance their endurance. These studies from the '70s are hard to find and weren't carefully controlled. A [2012 systematic review](#) reveals mixed findings, and none of them meet international standards for proper clinical trial reporting, [according to science writer Melinda Wenner Moyer](#).

### **SMALL CHANGES**

Nevertheless, I persisted. By the second week, I was indeed feeling sharper. My mental acuity seemed to peak particularly when I was tasked with doing something completely new like learn a new skill, especially if it involved movement. I was able to pick up dance combinations faster than I have in years, and I was also able to remember little things more easily like my grocery list or a person's name who I'd just met.

That's when I got a little cocky. Wildcrafted had sent me all three of their concoctions. Along with the one for the brain, there was also "Beauty" and "Energy." Their website says it's possible to take these in combination. "We recommend experimenting with our blends to find what combination works best for your body," it said. "Everyone's needs and results are different."

So I started taking the one for beauty, which is touted to "work to restore emotional balance, enhance elasticity of the skin, boost libido, and nourish the inner organs, resulting in shiny hair and glowing skin. It also helps to promote optimal thyroid and liver function while helping to fight free radical damage." This is brought to you by the combination of ashwaghandha, he shou wu, and schisandra.

I was excited to see how much smarter *and* more beautiful I could become. Unfortunately, around the third day of taking the two together, I started to notice that I was dragging. By 1 p.m. I was so sleepy I could barely keep my eyes open. My focus was shot, and I felt like I was working through a thick fog.

I had a feeling I knew what was going on. Although ashwaganda is reported to be nothing short of a [miracle adaptogen](#) used for more than 3,000 years in Ayurvedic medicine and currently [endorsed by none other than that Goop-y guru Gwyneth Paltrow](#), this was one of the trendy herbs I'd tried in the past without success. My previous experience came in supplemental pill form, and it had indeed tackled my general stress, to the point of making me fairly loopy. But this version flatlined me. Maybe you can't be brainy and beautiful simultaneously.

As soon as I reverted to just the brain formula, the fog lifted and my mental sharpness returned. So I stuck with that for the remainder of the month.

The upshot: I will continue to use the brain powder at least a couple times a week. I can't say it quelled general anxiety all that well, but I like feeling that my memory and ability to process new information is sharper than it was without it.

Of course, this could all be a placebo effect, but I doubt it, since I had that decidedly negative effect when I mixed in the other adaptogens. Consider me sold—and smarter.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lydia Dishman is a reporter writing about the intersection of tech, leadership, and innovation. She is a regular contributor to Fast Company and has written for CBS Moneywatch, Fortune, The Guardian, Popular Science, and the New York Times, among others. [More](#)