

## ‘Psychobiotics’: Can we control the way we think by altering gut bacteria?

The allure is simple: Drug development for neuropsychiatric disorders has lagged for decades, and many existing drugs don’t work for all patients and cause unwanted side effects. A growing number of researchers see a promising alternative in microbe-based treatments, or “psychobiotics.”

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Holobiome and a few other companies are eager to cash in on the burgeoning, multibillion-dollar market that has already sprung up for other microbial therapies, which aim to treat conditions including intestinal disorders, allergies, and obesity.

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GABA is a neurotransmitter that inhibits neural activity in the brain, and its misregulation has been linked to depression and other mental health problems.

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At Holobiome, [CEO Phil] Strandwitz and colleagues have identified and ranked 30 promising GABA-producing bacteria, including the ones [microbial ecologist Jack] Gilbert is testing. Now, the company is enlisting an outside manufacturer to figure out which GABA-producing bacteria are best suited to produce in large enough quantities to test in people. The researchers hope to complete regulatory and ethical reviews in time to start human trials by early 2021. “We’ve been able to progress at this rate because we know our microbiology,” Strandwitz says. The initial target conditions are insomnia and irritable bowel syndrome with constipation.

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