

Acupuncture and Depression: An Old Answer to an Old Problem

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In addition to conventional psychiatric management of depression, acupuncture presents a valuable treatment option for patients and their physicians. Why acupuncture? Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has identified and addressed the link between the body, spirit and mind for more than 2000 years.

According to the tenets of Chinese medicine, illness affects both the mind and body without separation between the two. Emotions and physical health are intimately connected—emotional disturbances have associated physical symptoms and conversely, physical disorders can have emotional consequences. When an individual experiences a strong emotion, physical symptoms often coincide. Sadness can produce a lump in the throat or difficulty taking deep breaths, and anxiety can result in heart palpitations, for example. Acupuncture works to bring the body and mind into a healthy balance, ensuring that both work synergistically in order for us to feel our best.

Depressive disorders affect almost 19 million Americans, or 9.5% of the population in any given one-year period and are estimated to cost the workplace over 40 billion dollars. At some point in their lives, 10%-25% of women and 5%-12% of men are likely to become clinically depressed. Common symptoms of depressive disorders include persistent sadness, persistent aches or pains, headaches, cramps or digestive problems that do not ease even with treatment, loss of interest in activities that were once pleasurable, insomnia or excessive sleeping, appetite loss or overeating, fatigue and decreased energy, difficulty with making decisions and inability to concentrate, pessimism and irritability and feelings of emptiness, hopelessness or worthlessness. Suicide becomes a desperate option for approximately 15% of people who suffer from severe depressive disorders. The personal and societal costs are staggering. Fortunately, many people seek treatment. Harvard Medical School reports that depression is one of the top five conditions for which people seek alternative care.

Efficacy of Acupuncture

Rigorous scientific data is only just beginning to come in, but results are pointing to acupuncture as a successful treatment strategy. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) is the Federal Government's lead agency for scientific research on complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). NCCAM sponsors and conducts research using scientific methods and advanced technologies to study CAM. CAM is a group of diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not presently considered to be part of conventional medicine, and acupuncture is currently being studied for many conditions, including depression.

In 1997, a meta-analysis completed by the World Health Organization listed depression (including depressive neurosis and depression following stroke) as a condition that has been shown through controlled trials to be treated effectively by acupuncture. 1998, Dr. John Allen and other researchers at the University of Arizona used acupuncture to treat a sample

of women with depression. After a total of 12 sessions, 70% of the women experienced at least a 50% reduction of symptoms. This is promising, particularly because women are twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with depression. This research marked the first U.S. randomized, controlled, double-blind study of acupuncture's effectiveness in treating depression. The NIH funded study concludes, "Acupuncture may alter brain chemistry by changing the release of neurotransmitters and neurohormones in a good way."

Stanford researchers, using a small sample of 61 pregnant women, found that those who were given acupuncture treatments had significantly fewer depressive symptoms. The researchers conclude that "acupuncture holds promise for treatment of depression during pregnancy," and may help with the long term management of depression. Another group found that menopausal women on tamoxifen had a significant reduction of anxiety and depressive symptoms. A University of South Carolina study suggests that acupuncture be considered for treating depressed patients infected with HIV. In other parts of the world, researchers seem to be even more actively engaged in learning about the benefits of acupuncture. Three Chinese studies reported that electro-acupuncture produced the same effects as certain anti-depressant drugs and had no side effects. In a study coming out of the United Kingdom, "significant improvements" were found in a small sample of depressed people and the report concludes that acupuncture contributed to the improvements. Australian researchers used laser acupuncture for people with a fear of needles and found significant diminution of symptoms. An Australian review of many complementary and alternative treatments studies concludes that "acupuncture appears promising as a treatment for depression, but requires further research."

Diagnosis

Depression is diagnosed with differentiation into patterns, each with a specific set of symptoms. Generally, there are two main patterns: deficiency and excess. A deficiency pattern will be marked by symptoms that are usually chronic rather than acute and often include loss of appetite, fatigue, weight loss, and poor memory. An excess pattern will reveal symptoms of overload and may include excessive emotional responses seen in agitation, mania, panic or rage. Symptoms of both deficiency and excess may exist in the same problem at different times, prolonged excess patterns can lead to deficiency patterns and vice versa. For example, a person diagnosed with bipolar disorder would have deficient symptoms while depressed and excess symptoms during mania.

Treatment

Treatment is designed to address and correct the unique pattern of each patient. Results are cumulative and if a patient responds to acupuncture, improvement is expected with each session. The treatment frequency and duration is dependent upon several factors including the chronicity of the condition and the level of investment from the patient, but generally begins with one or two sessions per week and tapers off as the condition improves.

A New Hope for Relief

Medicine is in the midst of a dramatic convergence of the paradigms of modern conventional treatment and ancient healing systems such as acupuncture. Each year, more and more people learn that acupuncture can provide the relief they desire, and physicians are learning that patients can receive a treatment that does not interfere with programs or medications they have initiated. Acupuncture is quickly becoming mainstream and it is offered at many

well known institutions, including the Memorial-Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, Stanford University Center for Integrative Medicine, Children's Hospital Boston, and Dana-Farber. A physician's order is not necessary to see an acupuncturist. To learn more, or to find an acupuncturist in your area please visit the New Hampshire Association for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine at www.nhaaom.org.

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About the Author

Dr. Fecteau is dually licensed and nationally Board Certified in Occupational Therapy and Oriental medicine. She currently serves as President of the New Hampshire Association for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine and as a Staff Editor for the American Association of Oriental Medicine. She maintains a private practice in Nashua, New Hampshire and is passionate about integrating the strengths of both conventional and complementary medicine. Her areas of specialization include the treatment of pain, stress and emotional/psychological disorders and her areas of interest include allergies, fibromyalgia, restless leg syndrome, gastrointestinal disorders and immunodeficiency.