

Chinese Medicine for Emotional Pain

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Experiencing emotional pain first hand is not something one necessarily does from choice. Most of us, however, don't get through life without it. Recently, I went through a painful process of bereavement, but unpleasant as it was, it had its compensations. Having practiced Chinese medicine for many years, I found that as I was going through the pain I was able to see clearly how my body was reacting to the stress. Almost analytically, I began to make notes so that perhaps my experience and some solutions I found would help others going through a similar situation.



Chinese medicine, formulated as far back as the second or third century B.C., consists of acupuncture and herbs. In order to understand this modality you have to follow the ancient sages' view of how they perceived the body to work.

Sadness and the Lungs

Practitioners work with Qi, the body's vital force or energy, which circulates throughout the system by means of channels or pathways. It's important to keep this force balanced because too much of it will cause as much discomfort as too little, and disruption of Qi in one part of body eventually affects another part.

For example, the emotion of sadness weakens the Lung Qi, which can be felt in the pulse of someone going through a trauma. In Chinese medicine theory, the Lungs govern Qi and if this is depleted it will lead to exhaustion, depression, crying, hopeless and helpless feelings and breathlessness. As I went through this I felt a definite weakening in the pulse for my Lung Qi and knew I'd be in deep trouble if I didn't take action.

The Heart moves the blood (a bit like an accelerator moves a car) and deficiency of Heart Qi can lead to deficiency of Blood, which is going to affect sleep. Blood in Chinese medicine theory, is seen as a slightly different substance than in Western medicine, and if the heart is not literally nourished by this fluid then the "spirit" cannot rest and the person will feel restless and full of anxiety. This is probably the most important disturbance factor because the body heals during sleep

Emotions in the Organs

The Liver's job is to distribute the Qi evenly throughout the body and to store blood. Trauma makes it difficult for it to perform this job, because the liver Qi congests easily causing irritability, dry or painful eyes, headache, anxiety and painful or missed menstruation.

In Chinese medicine theory the kidneys act like Atlas holding up the world, only their energy holds up other organs instead. They are the main source of Qi and blood which is easily disrupted by the emotion of fear, often resulting in kind of deficiency heat,. This is caused by another balance in the body called Yin and Yang with which most people are now familiar.

They are polar opposites. Yang is hot, light and upward moving, while the Yin is cold, dark and downward moving. When the Yin (cool) energy of the kidneys dips lower than the Yang (hot) energy, it causes an unpleasant heat. This heat can rise to the head causing night sweats, fatigue, anxiety palpitations, dry mouth and throat and insomnia. These symptoms are frequently found during menopause.

Helpful Tools

So, with all this in mind, I've listed some fairly simple, yet helpful tools, which can be utilized using Chinese medicine. Grief is a heavy load for the body to carry and will be twice as damaging if we're already running on half steam. So, obviously, I advocate looking after one's body on a daily basis so that, like an athlete who prepares for the big event, we are equipped to handle the knocks that come along. If we're lucky enough to get through unscathed, then we'll just feel better generally. A bonus in itself!

Because stress lowers the immune system, the first thing to have on hand are a couple of cold and 'flu patent remedies called *Zhong Gan Ling* and *Yin Chiao*, available in just about any Chinese herbs store. These are effective if taken immediately after the symptoms appear. Keep the neck covered, day and night, and take both herbs together following the directions on the box. This really is a case of not leaving home without them!

The next problem is most likely to be lack of appetite and poor digestion. Stress and anxiety, as I mentioned, congest the Liver Qi which creates heat. This heat not only rises to the head, but can also overflow into the stomach, causing acid regurgitation, gas and lack of appetite.

Dietary Guidelines

It's best to keep the diet light and to stay off caffeine, raw, greasy and spicy foods. This also applies unfortunately to decaffeinated coffee. The coffee beans are quite oily and this congests the Liver Qi. I found meat hard to digest, even fish sometimes. What seemed to work best were things like lentil soups, perhaps mixed with home-made oxtail bone soup and brown rice.

Food should be easy to digest so you get maximum nourishment with minimum work. Oysters are good for relieving stress, but take care, they are high in cholesterol!

If you're having serious trouble digesting, or are suffering from diarrhea after eating, try brown rice cream. You can either get it at a health food store or make it yourself. All you need to do is wash and boil a cup of brown rice for a good hour. Drain the water and put the rice in a sieve. With a wooden spoon, force the rice through the sieve and what collects on the bottom is the rice cream, minus the husk. It's very easy to digest, nourishing and neutral in energy. Or you could make Chinese congee which is like porridge. Add five cups of water to half a cup of Chinese white rice and simmer, covered on a very, very low heat for about six hours. Stir every so often so it doesn't stick to the bottom of the pan. This is very good for stomach Qi and easy to digest. You can add just about anything to it from soy sauce to honey.

Need I mention alcohol and cigarettes? Alcohol tends to congest the liver energy and does nothing to solve the long-term problem. And cigarettes – well, we all know the consequences of nicotine. It creates a lot of heat in the lungs and, as mentioned above, the anxiety will probably give you more heat than is comfortable anyway, so why compound the problem.

Herbal Medicine

Hsiao Yao Wan, mentioned in my article on stress (*Vitality*, September '93) is a patent medicine for relaxing the Liver Qi and usually helps to relieve stress headaches. Or, there's one called *Mu Xiang Shun Qi Wan* to help soothe the liver and calm the stomach when symptoms include heartburn, acid regurgitation, bloating and gas. If your nails are brittle and splitting and your skin feels dry and flaky, it's usually a sign of blood deficiency caused by congestion of liver Qi. This can be helped by use of a patent herb called *Shu Kan Wan* which decongests the liver, combined with one called *Sho Wu Pian* to nourish the blood.

It's important, however, to determine the root cause of the imbalance because, as I've mentioned in other articles, symptoms can be very misleading.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture helps to balance the Qi by the insertion and manipulation of tiny disposable needles into points situated along the pathways of energy. This is surprisingly painless.

When I'm manipulating needles I feel as though I'm fine-tuning a Stradivarius violin, because patients frequently tell me of their Qi moving and of feeling more balanced afterwards.

Assessing the patient is done in part by looking at the tongue and listening to the pulse. Both act like printouts to the body which informs the practitioner of the state of Qi and blood in each organ.

Care of the Body

I put exercise at the top of the list of self-help things to do, not frantic workouts which too many people indulge in, and which is only going to exhaust you more, but good, fast long walks. You only have to pick up a magazine on walking to read the reams of positive things it does for the body. Mentally, too, the rhythm of this kind of exercise is stabilizing and grounding. People with dogs that have to be taken out probably have it over the rest of us! It's easy to deny oneself, but those doggy eyes? Of course, in the kind of weather we had last year, going up and down the stairs may be the nearest thing most of us got to a walk! But many malls open early and make good "tracks", while many gyms have treadmills and you might even think of investing in a treadmill for yourself so you never have to be a hostage to the weather!

Deep breathing is also important to well being. It's easy enough to do – lie flat on something soft and warm, with a cushion under the knees. Feel the weight of your body and try to become aware of the different parts. For example, the heels pressing into the bed or floor, the sensation of the arms touching the bed. The cushion under your knees and the spine resting on the bed. Be aware of your natural breathing, the gentle expansion and contraction of the ribs. This is a very centering exercise and puts you in touch with yourself. It's important too to run your mind from the eyebrows down to the feet checking for tension and releasing it.

Then imagine the Qi being sucked up through the soles of your feet, like the suction in a vacuum cleaner. Visualize it traveling up your legs and into the lower abdomen (most people shortchange themselves here). Take the Qi into the chest, really filling the lungs with a deep inward sigh and take it right on up to the crown of the head. A lot of important energy channels meet here. Hold it for a count of two, making sure your shoulders are relaxed and that you're not straining.

Slowly release it, really deflating the lungs. Imagine you're sucking in energy and breathing out all the accumulated tension. Do this about five times and you'll feel like a different person. If you really concentrate on the Qi being drawn up through the feet and legs they will start to tingle. You obviously aren't really breathing up through your feet, so this is the Qi moving and where there's movement, there's healing.

When rivers get blocked, floods occur. So, too, when the Qi gets blocked, stagnation and illness occur. It seems almost too simple, but when the Qi flows smoothly, so does one's health and wellbeing.

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