

Recovering from Eating Disorders

Chinese Medicine Can Help Rejuvenate Damaged Qi Brought on by Chronic Bulimia (Part 2)

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Following my article in the Dec/Jan issue of Vitality on Eating Disorders, I was flooded with telephone calls on how acupuncture can help with food addictions and what can be expected at each session.

Having received too many phone calls to handle, it was clear that a follow-up article on food addictions was necessary. The main request from readers has been to outline how acupuncture can help such a disease, along with an expansion of the Chinese medical theory on Bulimia and what to expect in a session.

One of the most difficult things a food-aholic has to face in recovery is stomach discomfort. In my experience, food-aholics are in such emotional pain they will spend huge amounts of energy in trying to “leave” their body. They gorge on food to alleviate the pain, but then, feeling bloated and fat, have to get rid of it by vomiting or purging. The physical sensation of bloating after binging forces them back into an awareness of their body. This causes tremendous anxiety, and so the cycle continues.

Stomach discomfort is a very real symptom and can be alleviated by both acupuncture and herbs, thus helping the healing process Chinese medicine works with the flow of energy or Qi. The optimal directional flow of the Spleen Qi should be up, while the Stomach Qi is down. If the Stomach energy goes the wrong way you vomit. If the stomach has been filled with excess food one minute and forced to vomit the next, over a period of time, it will cause confusion of the Qi. The Spleen’s function of transporting and transforming food and water up will stagnate, and the Stomach Qi’s function of directing the waste food down, will also stagnate, causing bloating, gas, other digestive and bowel problems, as well as water retention.

So, when a bulimic takes steps to control the binging and vomiting, the Stomach Qi doesn’t immediately follow suit. It takes a while for it to strengthen and re-balance itself and that can cause a lot of digestive problems. In the beginning what frequently happens is that the food sits in the stomach and the weakened, confused Qi doesn’t digest it quickly or properly, causing bloating. The person is already trying to deal with the emotions that caused the eating disorder in the first place, and this bloating adds to their angst. The literal pressure of the bloating makes the person feel their body and that’s very, very hard for a bulimic to accept.



This is where acupuncture and herbs come in. By using tiny, disposable needles on specific points along the channel of energy, acupuncture can regulate and strengthen the Qi of the Stomach and Spleen which speeds up digestion. Herbs also, taken before and after eating, can help to strengthen the digestion and so lessen the discomfort of bloating and gas.

Food and Control

Nutritional guidance is essential, because it explores what foods are best for digestive disorders and it also teaches structure and discipline around food. A food-aholic has to relearn how to eat normally, and how to find the right brakes and controls during a meal. For example, how to cope with living in the real world of lunches out, or buffets where food is endless. Or how to cope with feeling full after eating and coming to terms with the fact that this is normal and important for health. In the beginning, nothing will feel normal. In fact, everything will feel dreadful, therefore it's important to learn structure around food until the body gets used to holding it and letting you know when it needs more.

Stop and Feel

Life has to be lived without the crutch the eating disorder has provided. Without this crutch the feelings have to be faced and a food-aholic will do practically anything to avoid that pain. From my own experience, and from what I see working in my clinic, there are two main roads to recovery. One is to stop (stop bingeing), purging, excessive exercising, smoking, drinking, shopping, cleaning, rushing, and any other frantic activity that might take the place of food); the other is to feel (the pain, panic, self loathing, disgust, terror and darkness, etc.). There is no way but through.

In recovery, food-aholics tend to concentrate on the bingeing and purging aspects, which is equivalent to driving a car with the accelerator and brake on at the same time. It's a total jam up. By the time you get to the bingeing part you might just as well keep going, because that destructive/protective side has the bit between its teeth and isn't going to quit. It's destructive because it's controlling your life and protective because it's trying to stop you feeling the pain. The crucial time is way before the bingeing and purging starts. It's important to become aware of when you are triggered, because it could be hours, or even days before. That's the time to get a foot in the door and to put tools of self-help into immediate action to stop the spiral of events. There really is no way out but through (stopping and feeling).

Relaxation

One way to access this is through deep relaxation and enhanced awareness. Centering and breathing exercises help with body awareness and can point to where the tension is being held. I find a lot of people have very, very tight stomach muscles and these have to be released in order to heal. The whole theory behind Chinese medicine is that the Qi or energy must flow freely around the body for health to be maintained, If the stomach is like a rock, the Qi (which is the life force) will stagnate. It's like trying to talk or sing with a stranglehold around the neck!

Aiding Recovery

I don't know if eating disorders existed in ancient China, or whether they used Chinese medicine to help. But one thing is certain; I find Chinese medicine, one of the oldest known to human kind, an exciting and powerful tool to aid recovery for this problem

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