

TREATING INSOMNIA WITH CHINESE MEDICINE

By Kate Kent, Dipl. Ac., C.H. (NCCAOM)

It is common knowledge that the immune system works best during sleep as it is at this time that our natural killer cells are generated. Sleep deprivation can lead to an array of serious diseases such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity and depression. We study sleep in sleep clinics, we take sleep medication to force ourselves to sleep, and still we are one of the most sleep deprived societies in the world. Nietzsche said “Sleeping is no mean art: for its sake one must stay awake all day”.



This problem is commonly seen in clinic and it is important for the practitioner to differentiate between an inability to sleep due to external or temporary influences and true insomnia. If the lack of sleep is due to noise, change in weather, pain, temporary emotional upset, or too much caffeine it will be restored when these influences are removed. However if there is a deeper energetic imbalance then it is insomnia. The word “insomnia” covers many different problems, such as difficulty falling asleep, waking during the night, restless sleep, night sweats that disrupt sleep, dream disturbed sleep, waking too early in the morning and being unable to return to sleep. And of course, there is the common complaint of not waking rested! One of the first rules of thumb is to use your bed to *sleep* in, not as another entertainment or work room. I was talking to a man who has a high powered job, and who has been suffering from severe anxiety and sleep deprivation for years, and he casually remarked that he always “worked” in bed before turning out the light! I suggested he stop that practice and his sleep has been more peaceful ever since. Reading something stimulating, or watching the news before sleep is totally contraindicated. Eating late at night, especially if alcohol is included, will disturb the heart Qi and will almost definitely cause a sleepless night. A patient who found it difficult to leave work behind at the end of the day and who consequently took a lot of stress home with him, worked out a formula that really worked. Every night when leaving his office he would diligently write all his worries and concerns on a piece of paper which he would then screw up and toss in the waste basket. Then he would shut his office door while saying out loud “the day is done”! He found this simple practice to be very effective and not only slept better but had a better evening with his family. In *The Art of Happiness*, the Dalai Lama’s cure for anxiety and stress is: “If there is a solution to the problem, there is no need to worry. If there is no solution, there is no sense in worrying either”.

Chinese medicine takes the interrelationship between the body and mind very seriously because strong emotions affect different organs which, when stressed, will disrupt the balance of other organs leading to disharmony. Think of a powerful dam. If it is properly maintained the water will nourish the agriculture, livestock and people of the community. If it develops cracks it can have devastating consequences. The Qi of the body works in the same way. Well balanced Qi supports the health of the individual, whereas disrupted Qi causes great discomfort and disease and a feeling of being *wired*. Sleep is dependent on a calm mind and the mind is rooted in the heart. If there is too much heat or deficient blood in the heart sleep will be next to impossible. For example, anger and frustration over time stresses liver Qi causing a buildup of heat which can easily overflow into the heart causing palpitations, mouth sores, anxiety, headaches and insomnia. It can also disrupt the Qi of the stomach causing poor digestion which, in turn, disturbs heart Qi. Too much worrying affects the spleen and, again, will affect heart Qi.

Difficulty Falling Asleep

This is due to a deficiency of blood in the heart and spleen and is a very common cause of insomnia, especially in older people where there is a physiological decline in Qi and blood. It is often accompanied by palpitations, fatigue, poor appetite, poor memory and dizziness. Acupuncture points would be chosen to tonify spleen and heart Qi, nourish heart blood and calm the mind. A practitioner may use the herbal formula, Gui Pi Tang, that can be taken in-between treatments and which would continue the work of the points.

Restless Sleep and Waking in the Night

This often occurs after the common cold which, if not completely cleared, can settle in the interior of the body and turn to heat. This heat can move upwards and disturb the heart and mind. There will often be a feeling of stuffiness in the chest, epigastric discomfort and a general feeling of restlessness even when awake. The treatment would consist of acupuncture and herbs to clear the heat and calm the mind. Heavenly Emperor's Formula is commonly recommended because it consists of herbs that nourish the yin and blood of the heart and calms the mind and is a good substitute for tranquilizers or sleeping pills.

Night Sweats

This is extremely common in women during menopause and will often be accompanied by dry throat, palpitations and poor memory. It isn't really insomnia because the lack of sleep is caused by night sweats. If there were no night sweats the person would sleep. I bring it up here because it is so common and is the cause of much anxiety, which further exacerbates the lack of sleep. This is caused by heart-yin deficiency (yin is an aspect of blood and is cool. It should naturally be present at night, like the night itself, but if it is deficient, the yang (heat) aspect will rise instead) causing discomfort. Acupuncture would focus on nourishing the yin and using "astringent" points to stop the sweating. There are many herbs that can be used in many different combinations, but a couple of my favorites would be a seed called Semen Biotae (Bai Zi Ren) which not only stops sweating but also nourishes the heart and calms the mind, and Rhizoma Anemarrhenae (Zhi Mu) which has the ability to clear deficient heat, enrich the yin and stop sweating.

Dream-disturbed Sleep

Often there will be nightmares, mental restlessness, tongue ulcers, palpitations, constipation and dizziness. This is known as heart fire and can be quite unpleasant. The diet of people with this problem will often consist of greasy, spicy foods with too much alcohol, all of which contribute to the heat. Obviously, in order to permanently restore a normal balance the diet would need to change. Acupuncture and herbs would focus on draining heart fire and calming the mind. To clear fire in the heart a practitioner may use a herb called Plumuia Nelumbinis (Lian Xin) which is bitter and cold and drains fire from the heart.

Waking Too Early

This indicates a gallbladder and heart deficiency and both the heart and the gallbladder Qi would need to be strengthened by acupuncture and, perhaps, herbs for normal sleep to return.

Chinese medicinal herbs are a great adjunct to acupuncture. Each herb in a decoction and each patent formula is carefully selected to treat a particular disharmony.

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