

Three Treatments for Anxiety Disorders

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

Anxiety is a very unpleasant type of mental disorder that affects literally millions of people. Anxiety can go hand in hand with depression and can range from mild unease to intense fear and panic. Medication, a panacea for many, can ease both the depression and anxiety but can also have side effects. Dr. Peter Breggin, a Harvard-trained psychiatrist, points out that drug therapy, while suppressing the symptoms of depression and other mental disorders, can make a person chemically toxic, which will actually deepen the problem.



This article is going to approach anxiety from three directions: counseling, acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), and diet. My clinical experience suggests that people in difficulties are very hard on themselves. “I should be over this by now”, they say, or “Why does it still bother me after all these years?” However, in order to deal with anxiety, we need to remember and reintegrate the experiences and feelings that gave rise to our anxiety in the first place. Patients often talk about what is bothering them, but few have actually dared to *experience* situations or emotions that trigger their anxiety in order to come to terms with them. Using Experiential Dynamic Counseling I encourage patients to face and deal with whatever feelings surface.

For example, a young woman came to see me suffering from panic attacks and manifestations of acute anxiety and fear. She was quite open about what was bothering her and could explain everything to me in minute detail. But, she could not face the deep emotions that had led to her present crisis. She could talk about them but she couldn’t experience them. This concept of experiencing was totally new to her because she had been coping for years by talking and by suppressing any feelings that came up. Her presenting problem was anxiety, but she came to understand that the anxiety was not the issue. In fact the anxiety was only there because of all her suppressed emotions. Any supportive comments from me or her boyfriend increased her anxiety. She would get tunnel vision, start to shake all over, her mind would go blank and she felt, in her own words, “as though she was going crazy”. She had suffered in the past from drug addiction and bulimia which she had worked hard to overcome. With gentle probing on my part and a real determination to get to the bottom of the problem on hers, we uncovered the fact that she was terrified of closeness. The more loving and caring her boyfriend was the more anxiety she felt. In our sessions we had to go step by step, monitoring her anxiety, looking at deep emotions that emerged, like anger, and learning how to deal with them. We had to look closely at what her real needs were and we had to deal with the emotions that her needs evoked. For example, she longed for closeness which evoked pain and anger at what she had never had. She felt, subconsciously, that anxiety was safer than anger. Now she learned that when she stood up to her boyfriend in an argument, her anxiety level decreased and when she shut her emotions down and did not stand up to him, her anxiety level increased. She had to learn how to experience anger in a healthy way which not only decreased her anxiety and increased her vitality but also allowed for a measure of closeness with her boyfriend.

TCM approaches anxiety from a completely different but complementary direction. We link anxiety and depression to the Liver and Heart and we also treat any accompanying symptoms like insomnia, palpitations and fatigue. We will take a careful assessment using the tongue and pulse as guides to the kind of treatment required, and then we insert tiny disposable needles that calm and nourish the Heart and relax the Liver. We use herbs in exactly the same way, to nourish, calm and move the Qi and Blood.

In TCM we consider diet central to well being, and problems with diet as causes for emotional problems. For example, we use terms like Hot, Cold, Damp or Sweet to describe the ways in which certain foods are good or bad for different conditions. There are cases where by eliminating sugar and carbohydrates a patient will feel less sluggish and depressed, or by eliminating caffeine and sugar, there will be a noticeable lowering of the anxiety.

All three of these approaches are beneficial. However, I consider counseling and diet to be the most important at the start of treatment. They are essential for getting to the underlying cause of the anxiety whereas acupuncture and herbs can only give temporary relief for severe anxiety.

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