

Memory Problems

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

Imagine what it would be like to have no memory. We take for granted that we'll remember where we are going, where we live and what we did yesterday. The great English writer Oscar Wilde said "Memory is the diary that we all carry about with us". But what if that diary gets lost, worn or old? I believe the Baby Boomers coined the phrase a "senior's moment" and we all chuckle, but for some that "moment" is extremely serious.



My dog Max and I visit a nursing home every week and it's interesting to go into the locked Alzheimer's wing. One person in particular, who usually stares into space, comes alive when she sees Max and wants to stroke and hug him and give him a treat. It's like a distant memory is sparked when she sees him. Each week she greets him with the same recognition. But this article is not going to deal with something as final as Alzheimer's where there's a sad progressive degeneration of the brain cells it is going to address how poor memory is treated from a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) perspective and an emotional perspective, which can be helped with counselling.

In Western Physiology emotional and mental processes are attributed to the brain. In TCM certain organs are responsible for certain emotions. For example, the Heart relates to joy, the Liver to anger and the Lungs to sadness and worry. The Spleen relates to thinking and the Kidneys to fear. According to Chinese medical theory, memory depends on the state of the Spleen, Kidneys and Heart and there is a considerable overlap among how these three organs function. The Spleen houses intellect and influences memory in the sense of memorization, studying and concentration. The Kidneys house Will-Power and are responsible for memory in the sense of memorization of everyday events, names, faces, etc. The Heart controls memory because it houses the mind. If the Heart is nourished with Qi and Blood the mind will be strong, memory and sleep will be good and the emotions will be stable. However, if the Spleen is weak it will not be able to make blood and the Heart will not be nourished which will affect sleep and memory. If the Kidneys are weak it will affect the Heart causing poor memory, insomnia and agitation.

If the Spleen becomes weakened by over thinking or worrying it creates dampness resulting in lack of appetite, fatigue, loose stools, poor memory and a heavy feeling. The Spleen's function of transforming food and fluids into blood and its function of "holding" blood will be impaired which will create blood deficiency which, in turn, will create poor memory and concentration.

The Kidneys need to be powerful and full of Qi in order to support all the other organs. Kidney-Essence (an aspect of Kidney Yin) produces Marrow which nourishes the brain. If Kidney Essence is weak it will result in poor concentration and memory, dizziness and the head can feel "empty". The Heart controls memory because it houses the Mind. If the Heart is full of Qi and Blood there will be good sleep, good memory and balanced emotions. However, if this is not the case, there will be insomnia, poor memory and mental problems such as depression and other emotional problems. Prolonged use of recreational drugs such as cannabis will result in poor memory and concentration. The Liver is an important organ in terms of emotions because its job is to regulate the smooth flow of Qi around the body. The problem is that it is also a sensitive energy which can disrupt emotions quite easily if the Qi becomes stuck, which it will do in times of trauma. This will cause further emotional instability which will affect both the Spleen and Heart.

Diet for Memory Improvement

Everything in TCM deals with balance. Balance of Qi, Blood, Yin and Yang. I think diet is one of the most important aspects for creating health. There are so many books available that it can be hard for people to pick and choose what is right for them. In TCM we talk about diet that is specific to the problem that is being addressed, so each person will be encouraged to eat foods that are directly related to their health issue. For people with poor memory we have to look at which of the above conditions we are addressing. If there is Dampness from Spleen Qi Deficiency then we suggest cutting out raw, cold food and drink. You can think of the Spleen like a sponge. It collects fluids and nutrients and squeezes them out to nourish the body. If the Spleen Qi is weak “the sponge” will not have the strength to distribute the nutrients and will instead become waterlogged. Cold drinks, raw or greasy foods weaken the Spleen’s ability to do its job properly and further aggravate the problem. I see many of my students suffer from weak Spleen Qi because they burn the candle at both ends while grabbing fast food due to lack of time or finances. However, lots of cooked vegetables, especially yellow – which will nourish the Spleen – fish and organic chicken will help to strengthen the Spleen. If there is blood deficiency it is important to try to eat more fish and chicken. There should be protein like, nuts, eggs, beans or chia seeds with every meal which will cut down on sugar cravings so prevalent with Spleen weakness. As women lose blood every month with their menstrual cycle it is more important for them to eat organic chicken and fish if possible to strengthen the blood. As the Spleen makes blood to nourish the body, a blood deficiency will affect the Heart causing palpitations, insomnia, anxiety or restlessness. So, in this case, taking care of the Spleen will take care of the Heart. Overwork and excessive sexual activity weaken the Kidneys and, as I mentioned at the beginning of this article, the Kidneys support all the organs and a weak Kidney will eventually have a negative impact on the health of the other organs.

Acupuncture

Through questioning and examining the tongue and pulse, which is like opening a book to the inside of the body, the practitioner will work out what pattern needs to be addressed with acupuncture and, perhaps, herbs. A common herb that is often prescribed to reduce Damp is Semen Coicis Lachryma Jobi (Yi Yi Ren) which is like a food and safe, except during pregnancy.

Counselling

Emotions have a strong impact on the organs. For example, sadness affects the Heart, worry affects the Spleen, anger affects the Liver (see my article on anger in Vitality’s November 2005 issue) and fear affects the Kidneys. High anxiety, which seems to be a very common problem (see my article on anxiety in Vitality’s September 2006 issue) will disrupt the Qi and affect thought. In some cases counselling is required. Anxiety due to past or present trauma disturbs the Qi and clouds the mind which causes a wicked circle of suffering.

A perfect example is the case of a young man I have been counselling who, when he first came to me for help, had such poor memory that he couldn’t remember large chunks of his life. He had poor appetite and alternating constipation and diarrhoea (a sign of Liver Qi overriding a weak Spleen causing Damp). He had experienced extreme emotional trauma in his early life without the support with which to process it. During a discussion he would describe a sensation of fuzziness in his head, muddled thinking and he would start to lose focus. He would have trouble answering the simplest question. This was caused by high anxiety that was triggered by something we were discussing. He had a hard time being “present” because his anxiety would take his mind somewhere else or, if what we were talking about brought up painful memories, he would shut down completely and go distant. In his case acupuncture would not have been of much help to him. It might have offered temporary relief by draining the Damp, but it would not have addressed the extent of his anxiety and the relief would have been short lived. We had to work together very slowly differentiating what was truth and what was fiction. For example, was I criticising and judging him (like past offenders) or offering help? Did I have his best interests at heart or was I out to get him? In other words, if

he didn't have evidence that I was going to hurt him, could he start to believe that my intent was to help? He was programmed to push me away because closeness in the past had caused him pain. We worked together on finding tools he could use when his anxiety began to take control. Slowly, as his anxiety decreased, his thinking became clearer and his memory improved considerably. Previously his anxiety had ruled him to the extent that there was no room in his head to think about what he wanted out of life because he was in survival mode. He now has a clear enough mind to look for a new area of work because he is unhappy with what he is currently doing and he knows he deserves better for himself.

Kate Kent, Dipl. Ac., C.H. (NCCAOM) practices Traditional Chinese Medicine and Experiential Dynamic Counselling. She has been in private practice in Toronto since 1985. For an appointment, please call 416-466-5849. www.katekenttcm.com

Published in Vitality Magazine (Spring 2013)