

THE FRAGMENTED SOUL

Treating Depression & Anxiety with Chinese Medicine

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Winston Churchill called it the black dog, poetically evoking the frightening and persistent nature of depression for those who suffer from it. An illusive, soul-stealing illness, major depression is considered the number one cause of disability worldwide. And in an age of advanced medical technology, scientists have been unable to determine whether the cause of depression is physical or psychological. The two conventional modes of treatment, psychotherapy and medication, have roughly equivalent success rates about 40-60% according to recent studies. And even with the use of multiple therapies, 10-20% of depressed patients remain unresponsive to treatment.

While the newest generation of drugs, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), have less dangerous and uncomfortable side effects than the older drugs, they are no more effective at relieving symptoms. And as with all antidepressant medication, patients may experience relief sooner but show a higher relapse rate than those being treated with psychotherapy

Against this background of confusion and treatment failure, Traditional Chinese Medicine stands out as a promising avenue of exploration. Using an elegant unified theory of mind, body, and spirit, Chinese doctors have been successfully treating mental and emotional disorders for 5000 years. Recent studies are finally beginning to validate the benefits of this ancient medicine for depression and anxiety, showing a success rate equivalent to both psychotherapy and antidepressant medication. And the advantage is a treatment that improves the health and well-being of the entire person without side effects.

CHINESE MEDICINE A DIFFERENT VIEW

One of the things that distinguishes Chinese Medicine is its unique view of mind/body/spirit, and a treatment methodology that addresses the whole organism.

According to this theory, humans comprise a triplicity of inter-related aspects called Jing, Qi, and Shen. We can translate Jing as Essence. This is the physical template of a human being our biology and genetics our physical substance. Qi we can call Function. This is our vital energy, our breathe, our movement. It is an immaterial force that is responsible for metabolic energy and the integrity of our structure. Shen is best translated here as Mind, our consciousness, awareness, and mental function.

These three aspects of a human being are related and interdependent. Jing and Qi engender mind, and the mind influences Jing and Qi. All three are actually different densities of Qi Jing being the most dense, and Shen the most rarified. This is an

important point. It means that in Chinese Medicine the body/mind is not just a relationship between two different fields that intimately influence one another, (an idea now common in Western alternative medicine), but is in fact two aspects of the same field of qi. This means everything about a human being can be treated by harmonizing the chi.

It is also helpful to differentiate how Western medicine and Chinese medicine view the mind. In Western medicine mind is a function of the brain. Disturbances of mood are generally seen as neurotransmitter imbalances. In Chinese Medicine mind equals Shen, a function that is stored in the heart and has nothing to do with the brain. It is believed that if the heart is well nourished and calm, it makes a comfortable home for the mind which can then remain peaceful, harmonious, and undisturbed.

SPIRIT AND SOUL IN CHINESE MEDICINE

But there is another meaning of the term Shen that is closely related to this idea of mind. This second meaning is that Shen is the total complex of mental and emotional aspects of the Self. In this sense, Shen is often referred to as Spirit. There are five of these aspects, or souls, and they are said to be stored in specific organs the Heart, Liver, Lung, Spleen, and Kidney. These organs are the physiological basis for the spirit; it follows that harmonizing their function through acupuncture acts to harmonize the mind/spirit.

This idea in Chinese Medicine that there are five aspects to the Self is not so different from similar concepts put forth by Western psychotherapists. For instance, Freud saw the Self in terms of Ego, Id, and Superego. Jung saw Self as a complex of conscious and unconscious patterns including personal and universal archetypes. So this idea we have in Chinese Medicine is not so different except that the five souls are related to the organs that are said to store them, and can be influenced through acupuncture.

Here is a description of the five souls and the role each plays in the totality of the body/mind. I give the Chinese name for each one, along with a modern archetypal name that signifies for me that soul's quality.

SHEN MIND/SPIRIT THE EMPEROR. The Shen is stored in the Heart and is responsible for the integration of the five souls. It has a gathering and uniting function. The Shen is also related to mind, consciousness, awareness, insight, intelligence, wisdom, ideas, and clarity.

HUN ETHEREAL SOUL THE VISIONARY. The Hun is stored in the Liver. It is the soul aspect most closely linked to the mind and can be viewed as another aspect of mind. It is our imaging, dreaming, visioning function and is connected to intuition, inspiration, planning, courage, and sense of purpose. The Hun is responsible for the coming and going of the mind, just as the Liver is in charge of the free flow of chi. This function helps us to maintain balance between introspection and self-reflection

versus relatedness to people and the world. The Hun is also closely linked to the Collective Unconscious. It is rooted in the Liver by an abundant supply of blood. When Liver Blood is deficient, the Hun can be restless leaving us spacey, timid, disconnected from our purpose, and unable to make decisions.

PO CORPOREAL SOUL THE BODYGUARD. The Po is stored in the Lung. It is linked to the body, in polarity to the Hun which is more linked to the mind. The Po gives somatic expression to the soul. It is responsible for movement, agility, balance, the senses, and the somatic expression of emotion. The Po is also responsible for protection from psychic influences. The Po is usually involved when a person feels too sensitive to negativity in the world.

YI INTELLECT THE SCHOLAR. The Yi is stored in the Spleen. Its domain is concentration, focus, applied thinking, and the generation of ideas. It is responsible for memory of facts and information. Disharmony of the Yi causes brooding, obsessive thinking, lack of focus and poor concentration.

ZHI WILL THE WARRIOR The Zhi is stored in the Kidney. It is related to determination, single-mindedness, steadfastness, and will power that is expressed as continuity over time. It roots the visionary activity of the Hun in the integrity of consistent action.

THE ETIOLOGY OF DEPRESSION

So how might this inter-related system get out of balance, creating the symptom picture we call depression? There are a myriad of ways. The Chinese doctor's job is to trace each patient's unique etiology and pattern through the diagnostic tools of Chinese Medicine observation, palpation, questioning, and listening.

But there are some common patterns. For instance, all Chinese medical textbooks basically agree that the onset of depression is caused by the emotions not flowing freely, which causes the qi of the liver to become stagnant. (Here we are talking about the liver as a set of functions as seen in Chinese Medicine, not the organ known as the liver in Western medicine.) This is because the liver, which has the job of regulating the free flow of qi in the body, is most susceptible to emotional stress. The resultant stagnant qi has a pour-over effect on other organs, most particularly the spleen, and heart.

Let's look at one possible scenario. Because of unresolved resentment and frustration the liver qi becomes stagnant. This manifests in symptoms that are directly related to the liver irritability, moodiness, withdrawal, a feeling of oppression, perhaps a loss of connection with one's goals, dreams, and vision in life. When qi remains stagnant, pressure builds up. This causes counterflow and heat. Because of the complex inter-relationship among the organs, liver qi might back up and interfere with the function of the spleen.

Now the spleen, which is in charge of digestion and assimilation, can no longer produce abundant blood. Also, the Yi, (the soul housed by the spleen.) loses its ability to provide us with clarity and intention. Now, in addition to liver symptoms we may also have muddled or obsessive thinking, brooding, and poor concentration.

Also, because the heart is deprived of an abundant blood supply it no longer properly houses the Shen. This causes restlessness, anxiety, and insomnia. Sometimes the heat generated by the stagnant liver qi rises up, directly agitating the heart and Shen. This adds an element of disturbance that is more intense and may manifest as outbursts of anger, disturbing dreams, or even manic behavior.

This is just one example of many possible etiologies. The route that all of this takes in any individual is a function of that person's temperament, lifestyle, character, environment, conditioning, and inherited tendencies. Through careful diagnosis, the Chinese doctor sees through the confusion, sorts out the pattern, and develops a treatment approach that will balance the whole system.

TREATMENT AND HOPE

What might be an expected treatment plan? Though each patient is different, there are some guidelines. The treatment program employed in a recent well-designed study of acupuncture and depression consisted of biweekly treatments for one month, weekly treatments for the second month, and a monthly follow-up treatment for a year. This plan is based on acupuncture only, without the use of herbs, and without complementary treatments like psychotherapy. Though acupuncture alone works well, it is reasonable to assume that integrating these additional tools might help patients experience symptom relief more quickly.

The question often arises about whether depression is actually more prevalent in modern society. Or are people just talking about it more, and becoming more adamant in their search for happiness? It's impossible to know for sure. However one thing is clear: Churchill's black dog has been around for a long time. The famous Tang Dynasty doctor Sun Si Miao once said that the root of all illness which is not caused by an external pathogen, is the patient not loving themselves enough. An astonishing and poignant statement from a doctor who worked a thousand years before the advent of psychotherapy as we know it.

Sun Si Miao, who treated many mental and spiritual disorders, had only the tools of Chinese Medicine at his disposal: acupuncture, herbs, and an elegant understanding of the radiance and complexity of the human soul. These are the same tools acupuncturists have available today. In the hands of a dedicated and compassionate practitioner, this ancient medicine can open a path of integration, hope, and healing for those plagued by the despair of depression.