

Reflections on Success in Your Practice

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Success

What makes an acupuncture and Oriental medicine practice successful? Recent graduates and experienced practitioners alike have asked me this question many times. I also ask myself this question as my practice evolves and changes. First, "success" must be defined individually, as the answer will most likely be different for each of us.

Success may be defined simply as enjoying your work and loving your choice of careers. It might be learning a skill which enables you to help others, thus helping make the world a better place. Success might be maintaining gainful employment, being self-employed, or employing others. It could mean earning a certain level of income or reaching specific financial goals.

In your practice, success might mean receiving referrals from a wide variety of health professionals, or working in an integrated health care setting where both conventional and traditional medicine are provided. It could also mean establishing a reputation as a quality acupuncture and oriental medicine provider in your community. Perhaps it is as simple as helping others feel better, having successful treatment approaches, or developing skills to help most of the people that come to your practice seeking your expertise.

There are many ways of defining "success. It's important that when you begin to make your practice more successful, you begin there. By defining what a successful practice is to you, you will know your goals.

Philosophy

How do you reach these goals? Whether you are in a successful practice now, have already reached some degree of success, or are still struggling to build a successful practice, how can you achieve greater success? If you currently have a successful practice, how can you make it more successful?

The foundation of success is to love what you do and be fulfilled by it, without focusing on your income or patient volume, but by finding satisfaction in providing the best service possible. Personal growth, developing communication skills, management experience, and deeper understandings of medicine, as well as exploring new interests, are byproducts of success in your clinical practice. Everything revolves around your philosophy, your spirit/shen, and grows out of who you are, what you're doing and why.

The practice of AOM is somewhat like a relationship with a master. It doesn't matter how you arrived there (curiosity; a desire to serve; power; knowledge; insecurity; divine inspiration): all that matters is that you're here. AOM is a field of medicine which attracts people from diverse sociological, economic, ethnic and religious backgrounds, yet there is something about the practice of AOM that inspires seemingly devotional dedication and has birthed a new "family" of practitioners.

We share a common experience. Many of us have witnessed amazing responses to challenging cases or had personal healing experiences, and our practice doesn't fit easily within the conventional Western paradigm of health and medicine. We apply a unique understanding and philosophy in our practice. AOM is not simply a group of techniques that deal with certain symptoms. They encompass a whole understanding of the universe that we begin to grasp with ongoing study and can share through our practice.

It is this understanding, more than anything else is, which makes us unique. It isn't puncturing the skin with needles, warming the body with moxibustion or creating suction with cupping that attracts people. It is instead this world view, an understanding of the interrelationship and interdependence of all things which people are searching for. They want to understand (or already do) this cosmological view of the interconnectedness of things, the seemingly hidden relationships between different aspects of being. We have been given these incredible understandings which have helped our lives, our health and balance, and now we are able to share them by treating and educating our patients.

What excites you the most about AOM? What have you gained from it other than your livelihood, income and self-reliance? Has your understanding of your role in the universe, your method of maintaining balance in your life, transformed since embarking upon your education in AOM? Is this something you take time to communicate to your patients? Perhaps you find time to tell them how many appointments they need, what herbs they should take, or what exercises they could practice. However, do you take the time to share your enthusiasm for the medicine and philosophy, to help them understand how to achieve total health and balance through awareness and responsibility? Success is made up of a complex assortment of ingredients that must be prioritized and combined, like herbs in a decoction. The prescription must be adjusted as conditions change. For each goal we reach, we create new goals and develop deeper understanding.

Education

Think about what success is to you and what you're really seeking through your practice. Picturing your goal brings you closer to realizing it. Second, think about what truly inspires you about the practice and philosophy of acupuncture and Oriental medicine. Find simple ways of communicating this with your clients. Share this information, educate them and help them understand the concepts of yin and yang, the eight principles and five phases (elements). Give them a taste of this language and how it may benefit them.

Later in this series, we'll discuss specific techniques, approaches and procedures to build and maintain a successful practice. However, you must also ask, "How skilled do you feel?" How confident and comfortable are you in tackling challenging cases and personalities and treating them appropriately? If you feel inadequate or less skilled than you would like, start by addressing your professional needs. Read books in areas in which you feel unsure. Attend continuing education seminars in areas that interest you or where there are skills you think might be helpful clinically. Bolster your understanding, so that when you are faced with a challenge, you welcome it.

Being an AOM practitioner is akin to being a public speaker. What you present is not the key issue. People look for confidence, whether they feel you are being truthful, and if you are speaking from experience. In other words, are you trying to sell them a used car, or are you trying to share your gratitude and enthusiasm for what is possible through this understanding of who and what we are, and what we perceive health and wellness to be?

Balance

One of my favorite ways to illustrate yin and yang is that yang is desire and yin is contentment. Desire can be for success, knowledge, skill and reward. Contentment can be expressed as gratitude, acceptance and embracing of what one has, appreciation for the independence, freedom, health and abundance we have in our lives. Are you in balance?

As you strive to succeed and cultivate clear desires about where you want to go, don't forget to cultivate contentment, to be grateful for what you have accomplished. Maintain balance between yin and yang.

Practitioners often discuss whether treating people takes or gives energy. This is a very important point, which revolves around a basic belief or understanding (experience). I feel tired and exhausted when I have been mentally concerned and worried, but I feel strengthened and full of life after a day when I have been sensitive to myself and others, guiding them and helping them feel better. Examine whether you feel grateful and accepting, or if you desire something else. Clients and patients feel this immediately.

To reiterate: clearly define success for yourself, and you'll find your goals. Return whenever possible to the core of why you are doing what you are doing. What is exciting or special about it? Try to communicate your enthusiasm the best way that you can. Frequently remind yourself of this, especially when you are feeling more challenged by clients or are establishing a new practice. These are the first steps toward building and managing a successful practice and reaching your goals.

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