

Acupuncture in the Treatment of Substance Abuse

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Everyone claims addiction is a major problem in this country. The jails are crowded with addicts. Addiction, either directly or indirectly, costs untold millions (and possibly billions) of dollars in every area of life: poor health; lost productivity; crime; accidents; and so on. Current treatment is helpful but extremely limited. It works fairly well in the short term but is abysmally ineffective in maintaining recovery over time.

Addiction is a state of mind. Addictive thinking is so pervasive in our country that we tend to lose perspective, and substance dependence merely marks the extreme end of a continuum. In simple terms, addiction stems from an unreasoned, counterproductive attachment to an idea, person or thing. You can be addicted to drugs, alcohol or nicotine, but you can also be addicted to food; money; exercise; work; power; sex; or television.

The addictive state of mind generally stems from an inner fear that without the [fill in the blank], you will not be OK. In other words, on some level, you believe that without the [fill in the blank], you will feel inadequate or unfulfilled. Addictive thinking, in this sense, seeks validation from outside, and uses the [fill in the blank] to provide that validation.

Addictive attachments are a reaction to an inner sense of emptiness, so in an acupuncture paradigm, addiction is perceived as a condition of "empty fire." This describes the volatile impulsivity of many addicts. It also acknowledges the underlying feelings of weakness and fear that set someone up for addiction.

To understand how acupuncture contributes to substance abuse treatment, it helps to have a basic grasp of the differences between Eastern and Western medical paradigms. Oriental medicine assumes that mind, body and spirit are inextricably connected and affect each other. It relies heavily on the body's intrinsic capacity for healing itself. Imbalances in the body's energy matrices cause disease, and acupuncture heals by restoring balance.

This paradigm is very different from that of Western medicine, which looks outside -- primarily in the form of pills -- for healing. This is not to denigrate Western medicine, which is unsurpassed in certain areas. However, its limitations are nowhere more apparent than in the treatment of substance abuse.

The National Acupuncture Detoxification Association (NADA), founded in 1985 by Michael O. Smith, MD, DAC, promotes integration of auricular (ear) acupuncture in the treatment of addiction. Dr. Smith began using acupuncture over 25 years ago to treat heroin-addicted clients in the Lincoln Hospital substance abuse treatment program, located in the drug-infested ghetto of New York's South Bronx. Because acupuncture worked so well to alleviate withdrawal symptoms, the clinic was soon able to stop using methadone. He also found clients tended to remain in treatment, participated more regularly, and demonstrated significantly less substance use in their daily drug screens. They reported a generally improved sense of well-being and a reduction in cravings.

Dr. Smith emphasizes that acupuncture is an adjunct (but not an alternative) to standard substance abuse treatment. However, to incorporate acupuncture effectively into a program, it is necessary to embrace some of the philosophies of Oriental medicine. This is where the integration of Eastern and Western paradigms can become tricky.

Standard Western substance abuse treatment is confrontational; it operates on the assumption that the patient's denial must be shattered before recovery can begin. Relapse is often cause for dismissal from the program, even though everyone admits relapse is part of the disease. Everyone also acknowledges that addiction is a disease of lying - to oneself and to others - yet most treatment relies heavily on talk, either through counseling or meetings. While medications are useful in the short term for detoxification, they are generally less effective for long-term maintenance, and they are expensive.

Anyone - addict or not - who has experienced the standard NADA five- point ear acupuncture protocol can tell you they feel better after the treatment. "Calm but energized," "lighter" and "relaxed" are some typical descriptions.

The NADA protocol involves inserting needles at ear points deemed especially valuable in the treatment of substance abuse. These points replenish depleted energy in the internal organs and calm the nerves. Once the needles are in place, patients sit quietly for 30-45 minutes, then -- in most centers -- remove the needles themselves.

Acupuncture provides a non-drug-induced sense of well-being, which patients recognize cannot come from the outside, since there is nothing in the needles. The improvement must come from within, an idea that empowers them to believe in their body's innate capacity for healing. Over time, this builds the self-confidence necessary for long-term sobriety.

Smith asserts the acupuncture needles also provide a non-verbal tool for relating to the patient. Many addicts already have poor communication skills, are distrustful of people (including themselves) and do not wish to talk. The needles give them an excuse to sit quietly in a safe, non-demanding and supportive environment, to get centered and prepare for the next step in the process.

Treatment centers that include acupuncture take a nurturing, but not enabling, approach. The goal is to build self-reliance from the inside out by encouraging even small gains while de-emphasizing punishment for missteps. Patience with the process is key to an acupuncture-based treatment program.

The criminal justice system has so far been more responsive to the benefits of acupuncture than mental health professionals. Several states have established so-called "drug courts," through which non-violent addicts are mandated into treatment rather than jail. A natural partnership is developing between the drug courts and acupuncture-based treatment programs, as addicts are forced by the courts into a setting that nurtures them into recovery.

Last year, Georgia law changed to allow NADA-certified acupuncture detoxification specialists to practice here, thereby opening the state to the widespread use of acupuncture in the substance abuse treatment setting. This change has the potential of launching Georgia into very promising but largely unexplored territory. It will be interesting to watch the process unfold.

For more information on acupuncture detoxification, see the following websites:

www.acudetox.com

www.ndsn.org/SEPT95/GUEST.html
www.silcom.com/~alexb
www.standingpost.com/acupuncture.html

AUGUST 2001

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