

Patients are often poor judges of their own progress. This being the case, you will encounter patients who, during the course of treatment, tell you they are not feeling any better when in fact their condition has improved. Many times, a patient has told me they were feeling no better since the time of their previous treatment, only to have their spouse cut in and insist that the patient has been noticeably better and able to do much more than they had before.

When taking your patient's history, ask what makes their condition worse. Do certain positions, activities or other factors aggravate the patient's symptoms? Make sure you note these factors and refer to your notes when seeing the patient for follow-up treatments. A patient with low back pain, for example, tells you that their back bothers them after sitting or standing for long periods, causing them to lose sleep at night. When you see the patient again for follow-up treatment and ask how they have been feeling since you last treated them, they tell you they are "the same." When you ask about each aggravating factor, the patients tells you that standing and sitting is still causing pain, but reveals that they are now sleeping well. The patient has improved, but doesn't realize it. Gently reminding the patient what they originally had told you about their condition helps them to realize they are making progress. This realization can make the difference in a patient's decision to continue treatment.

When describing the healing effects of acupuncture to my patients, I use the analogy that facilitating healing is like growing a plant. First, you must get the seed to germinate and sprout. This is like seeing even modest improvement in any of the patient's aggravating factors. The next phase is nurturing the sprout to grow. It is important to be able to measure any improvement in these factors, because it indicates the treatments are beginning to work and should be continued to help the improvement to grow.

In addition to identifying aggravating factors, I tell my patients we need to pay attention to five characteristics of their symptom(s):

1. Intensity. This is the most obvious factor, and often the only one your patients will focus on.
2. Frequency. How often do symptoms become aggravated?
3. Capacity. How much of an aggravating factor does it take before symptoms are aggravated?
4. Rebound capability. How quickly can a patient get back to normal functioning after symptoms are aggravated?
5. Medication levels. Has the patient reduced their medication levels?

often explain to my patients that because acupuncture helps the body to heal itself naturally, they may not feel anything "healing" any more than they can feel a cut healing. I ask them to pay close attention to changes in these five characteristics in any of their aggravating factors, and to report these changes to me. I explain that any improvement represents a sprout I hope to make grow. I also warn them that the effect of treatment usually takes place day of (or the day following) treatment and may only last a day or so. This is important, especially if you are seeing a patient once a week or less. By the time you see them next, the patient may have had some improvement for a day or two, then regressed to their old levels. I make sure my patients understand that even a day or two of improvement is a much better sign than no improvement at all, and it gives us something to build on.

Because many patients see noticeable improvements in the first couple of treatments, I don't go through the trouble to explain the above until such time I sense a patient may be getting worried they are not progressing. I am also careful not to put words in my patient's mouths or suggest that a possible tiny improvement in their condition is a sure-fire sign they will be cured. I have found, however, that keeping careful track of my patient's subjective complaints and encouraging them to do the same can be the pivotal factor that convinces them to continue treatment.

DECEMBER 2001