

# Explaining How Acupuncture Works

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When people seek acupuncture treatment for the first time, they often have several questions that need answers, in order to feel comfortable receiving treatment and participate actively in the healing process. Some patients even express embarrassment at having sought acupuncture care, not knowing what to expect; if it will benefit them; or what is involved. This is primarily a result of insufficient media exposure, as well as a lack of understanding of AOM by other health professionals, although both of these contributors appear to be improving daily. The introduction of an international acupuncture and Oriental medicine day (AOM Day) on October 24th is a step forward for AOM, and is a vehicle for expanding public awareness.

How you explain acupuncture and Oriental medicine to your patients is a critical factor in expanding public knowledge of AOM, as well as inspiring confidence, trust and patient compliance within your practice. How do you introduce acupuncture to your patients? How do you describe it and explain how it works? Explaining how acupuncture works provides an incredible opportunity for patient education. It can move a patient beyond acupuncture and into the fullness of Oriental medicine, beyond symptom/pain focus and into a perspective of wellness and preventative care. In this article, we will share ideas and techniques gleaned from a combined 30 years' experience in thriving private practices in an attempt to enhance your ability to educate, guide, and support your patients.

Joni Kroll (JK): I have always been fascinated by how practitioners explain acupuncture. Whenever I attend seminars or receive treatment, I always ask for explanations and carefully listen to the metaphors and descriptions used by experienced practitioners. The responses range from the very esoteric to the purely scientific. Commonly, I hear the needle as an "antenna/receiver/radio transmitter" example. I have found that my explanation varies depending on the type of patient I am consulting with or treating.

Kabba Anand (KA): After reviewing a patient's history and reason for consulting with me, I ask about the patient's expectations of treatment. On the patient intake form, I ask the patient to indicate whether he/she is seeking pain relief, energy balancing, or preventative care. Then I explain how acupuncture works at the level and depth at which the patient has indicated an interest. For example, if a patient comes in primarily for stress management and emotional balancing, I might focus more in explaining the Five Element system and the emotional aspects of the *zang-fu*. If a patient is seeking treatment for a sports-related injury, I'll elaborate on a more conventional and mechanical explanation of acupuncture's actions. However, the foundation of how I explain AOM remains consistent.

JK: I have distilled my basic explanation down to, "Acupuncture works by helping the body to heal itself." I then elaborate, weighting my explanation either more toward Oriental medical or Western scientific terms. My "Western scientific" response follows closely to what I learned from Deke Kendall in the acupuncture orthopedics program. For these patients, I may discuss neurotransmitters; homeostasis; descending control mechanisms; and neural pathways. For the less-educated but still Western-oriented patient, I will modify this response, using descriptions like,

"the body's natural pain killers, anti-inflammatory and feel-good brain chemicals" instead of endorphins, corticosteroids and serotonin. I may say, "Our bodies are designed to be self-healing. When you get a scratch on your arm, you don't have to think about healing it. Your body automatically responds to the injury by increasing blood clotting factors to stop any bleeding, making and sending white blood cells to the area to fight any infection, and forming a scab. The acupuncture needle safely stimulates this same healing response, directing the body's natural anti-inflammatories and pain killers to the area of need."

KA: I begin by introducing the unique energetic system that is AOM, and showing how closely it correlates with the modern chemical/electrical models most people can grasp. It's helpful to have an acupuncture chart in the room. By seeing the channels and their distribution, patients find it easier to understand how this energetic system relates to the vascular and nervous systems. I explain how the ancient Chinese developed their unique and accurate medical system through careful and diligent study of the body; mind; emotions; spirit; and the natural world around us. Through applying gentle and precise stimulation to specific sites on their body, homeostasis, balance and a healing response are supported. Acupuncture needles are conductors, and when placed in points that have increased conductivity, can effectively "tune" the body to maximize health and wellness.

JK: My traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) elaboration goes something like this: "In TCM, we recognize that a balance of *qi* is essential to health and harmony in the body. When this *qi* (energy) is blocked or stagnated in any way, the body's lines of communication (meridians) are weakened and disease or pain results. By unblocking this stagnation, the flow of energy is restored and the body can heal itself." I then give several different analogies for unblocking stagnation. I find that many of my patients understand computer analogies easily. I'll say, "Think of it as your body having too many windows open at one time, and you keep getting error messages. Acupuncture is like running the Maintenance Wizard or hitting Control-ALT-Delete to reboot your system." For a more visual person, I may say, "Imagine a river that has gotten dammed up with debris. By removing the logjam, the water can begin moving again, eventually allowing the river to flow freely. Acupuncture works by removing the debris, be it built-up emotions, muscle spasms or nerve irritation."

KA: I inform patients that acupuncture, if performed properly, can bring the body into balance and assists in the healing process through the regulation of *qi*/energy, blood and fluid in the body. Acupuncture removes blockage or obstruction; stimulates the immune system; and harmonizes emotions. If the patient wants or needs a more detailed explanation, I tell him or her that when acupuncture needles are placed in very specific intramuscular locations, they stimulate the nociceptive proprioceptors and trigger the release of neurotransmitters in the brain that can, among other things, reduce pain and inflammation, and stimulate healing in the body's tissues.

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We both always take time to show each patient an acupuncture needle, and let him or her know that we only use pre-sterilized, disposable needles. Patients are shown that the needle is a monofilament, and not hollow to pass fluid, like a syringe; therefore, it can be a much finer instrument. If a patient is especially anxious, it is often helpful to quickly insert a needle into your own arm to demonstrate the technique.

It is through education and communication that positive and productive healing relationships can be established with your patients. Often patients complain that they feel their physician either did not explain their condition and treatment options adequately, or did not listen to them carefully. As AOM practitioners, we are creating supportive and educational patient-therapist relationships, which may well become a model for other health care fields in the months and years ahead.

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