

The Knee Bone's Connected to the ... Stomach?

WHAT DO KNEE PAIN, SINUSITIS AND ACID REFLUX HAVE IN COMMON?

Nancy Post, MAc, PhD

Most people would not think to ask this question because they would never believe an answer exists. Take my client Mark, a practical, solid fellow in his 40s. He is a fourth-generation stone mason who runs his family's construction business. He's the kind of man who values a solid foundation, whether it's made of family knowledge or fine stone. While he treasures traditional methods, Mark believes in giving the past a vote, not a veto. He's working to grow a modern family business without sacrificing the family reputation for high-quality work.

This need for simultaneous stability and change presents challenges. The family was accustomed to doing standard jobs, like building stone walls or installing driveways. Mark's leadership led to new challenges. For example, the company bid upon and won a contract to do land planning and all of the ceramic, stone and walkway installation at the city's art museum. Mark has transformed a small family-owned masonry business into a full-service landscape and land-management group. Contracts are bigger and they have given Mark enormous satisfaction, as he has felt more and more capable of creating a stable base for the people he loves.

His wife, Carol, is an IT manager and has helped him to introduce technology into a family business whose best tools had always been manual. Project managers now use laptops as well as picks and axes. Despite jibes from elders, Mark has quietly updated office systems for billing, managing projects, managing inventory and payroll. He evaluated the company's performance against competitors and created plans for growth in areas of the market in which more opportunity exists. For the first time in 80 years, someone in his family has made a business plan!

Confident that he could learn the necessary business skills to continue the transformation of the business, he enrolled in a local executive MBA program where I was teaching a course called "Change Management." In this class, students identified all types of changes that were occurring in their organizations, including leadership, direction, staff, location, vision, mission, values, infrastructure and resources. We also talked about personal changes. "What has changed about you since you took this job?" I asked.

"My gut and my knee," answered Mark. "And my face ... no, my nose ... no, probably my sinuses!" he said, struggling for accuracy. Of 32 people in the class, Mark, an intrinsically physical man, was the only one to notice a change in his body as a result of workplace change. Other people were aware that their work had been altered as a result of workplace changes, but no one else recognized that the change at work would likely mean changes in their energy. He was the only one at the time to calibrate the physical impact of these changes. Interestingly, two years later, when I attended the graduation ceremony, a number of the women in the class mentioned that the MBA program had changed them, adding pounds and dress sizes they hoped to shed now that they had completed the degree!

Mark was surprised by his own answer. "I went from using picks and hammers to sitting at a desk and driving a car! I shouldn't be feeling more pain, I'm *doing less!* The guys shoveling gravel have

the right to pain!"

Is pain only justified when it has a muscular origin? To a man like Mark, discomfort is something to endure and ignore until it becomes debilitating. Responding to pain demonstrates weakness and makes you feel vulnerable - effeminate even! Real men endure pain. Yet in front of 31 colleagues, including successful managers and leaders of area organizations, he admitted not one, but three signs of workplace stress: his knee, sinuses and stomach.

Formerly a high-school football player, an old injury to his lower leg has bothered Mark chronically since he broke his fibula in a tackle. He also suffers a long history of problems with his digestion, beginning as a child with food allergies and evolving into chronic and often painful flatulence (which was also an embarrassment when his work took him indoors). Though formerly seasonal, the phlegm in his sinuses is now a constant element in his life. Damp weather makes everything worse. These seemingly innocent problems escalated over time as his work responsibility grew.

"Are any of these symptoms better or worse at any time? I asked. And are they all better or worse at the same time, or do they come and go independently of one another?"

"Funny you ask!" Mark replied. "They seem to come and go together. When one is worse, the others are, too."

"And when are they worse?" I asked.

"When I'm worrying about proposals for new work," Mark responded. "I worry a lot. If I don't succeed, the whole family comes down. I'm carrying a lot of people."

So, what connects Mark's knee pain to his sinuses and to his indigestion? His worry, one could answer. But there is also a line of energy that runs from his eyes, through his gut and down his leg, through his knees. It's called the stomach meridian, of course. Like waterways crossing North America, connected pathways form a system of energy for the body. One of the longest channels is the stomach meridian, which distributes the energy of the stomach. What does the stomach do? It digests, holds and contains not only food but, metaphorically, also thoughts and feelings.

"I receive, process and digest all nourishment coming from all sources in Heaven and Earth."

- Suwen, Stang Interpretation, 1985.

"What do you feel when you write proposals?" I asked Mark. "First I think, 'what does the client need?'" he answered. "Then I cogitate about how we can meet their need, thinking up all the ways that we can break down the job into smaller parts. Then I think about our crew and whether they can do the job. I think about materials, timing and finally, cost. It's a lot to think about, and the whole process takes hours. In the end, I worry whether or not our bid will win and if we'll get the job."

I think to myself, *he breaks the work into "digestible" parts and while evaluating the work, he uses the energy from this pathway.* It's as if the reservoir in this line of energy in Mark's body has a pipeline to his company - his energy fuels the business. But then, there isn't quite enough left for him, and his symptoms get worse.

Having diagnosed the source of his periodic pain flare-ups, I was now able to work with Mark on addressing the problem from two directions: clinically and organizationally.

Clearly, he can never be sure his bids for work will be accepted, but he can make the process of developing the proposals less onerous and taxing on his energy. In a team with other class members and Carol, the IT manager, we built a set of proposal templates that identified all the different bid elements (staff, materials, timing, cost), which he could customize using the experience of past jobs tracked within his new financial and office systems, thereby adding a stable structure to the bid process.

And for him, personally, I suggested a short course of acupuncture treatment, which boosted and rebalanced his energy; as well as prescribing *er chen wan*, a Chinese herbal patent medicine whose origin descends back to Chen Shiwen, et al., in 1080 AD.¹ The result: support for stability and change, simultaneously.

As Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallee wrote, "You can see that both stability and transformation are necessary for thinking, which is just a refinement of the fundamental notions linked with Earth."² In this case, classical Chinese notions of energy enhanced the life and business of an ambitious earth-mover.

References

1. Fratkin JP. *Chinese Herbal Patent Medicines*. Shya Publications, 2001, p.215.
2. Larre C, Rochat E. *Spleen and Stomach*. Monkey Press Publication, 1990; p. 52.

JUNE 2007