

Trauma: The Hidden Pathogenic Factor

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Have you ever experienced a burn that instantly felt better once you put ice on it? After a few minutes of relief, it is natural to assume that removing the ice would not cause an increase of pain, so you take off the ice. Surprise, the burn becomes more intense and the pain sinks deeper into your body. You reapply the ice. This goes on for a while. Finally you can remove the ice and the pain will have sufficiently subsided. Trauma works the same way in that it continues to trickle into your body unless you stop it. If left unchecked, this silent toxic force seeps deeper over a number of years.

A burn feels better over time, but trauma becomes worse. We all know of a college football or tennis player who felt great until hitting 40 or so. Then the trauma that resulted from acute injuries during the teenage years has enough time to warp the joints and create arthritis, twist the bones and cause spurs, or dry the tendons, which results in chronic tendonitis. As our returning soldiers can attest, post-traumatic stress disorder increases its deleterious effects as years pass. Read the research on Vietnam vets or children who have inadvertently been harmed by rough divorces. Studies substantively documents that psychological trauma-related disorders worsen over time. These effects are cumulative. They have memory.

It has been an important decade for studying trauma. Practitioners have had the unique opportunity to watch patients react over time to the personal and national effects of 9/11. We witnessed the differing methods by which people have resolved or suppressed trauma, and we have all treated this insipid, pathological factor. It has touched all of our patients to differing degrees. Even today, if you question your patients on how 9/11 affected them, you will find trauma's residue.

Following the attacks, the divorce rate increased. The number of military enlistments went up, as did antidepressant medication prescription, and cigarette and ice cream sales. Other industries such as travel, conventions and weight loss struggled through the first year following 9/11. Crime rates fluctuated wildly, businesses were born, careers redirected and habits broken. Prejudice was eased between some people and increased between others. All in response to trauma on a national level.

I left Washington, D.C. on Sept. 10, 2001, to go home after having dropped my daughter off at college for the first time. She called the next morning and spoke of plane hijackings. One of the flights that went down had been my original return flight, which I had changed just hours before its departure.

I lost both personal friends and patients in Washington, D.C. and New York. I sat quietly for a month. When I was not sitting, I was organizing my linen closet, eating chocolate (the ultimate heart *yang* tonic) or cleaning out my garage. My brain had no apparent organizational ability, and my thoughts could not follow one another in sequence. I treated only a few patients because I had nothing to give. Whatever I had, I needed to redirect into myself to find my way back, out of shock and into my sense of personal identity. I had lost motherhood (or so it felt at the time), patients, friends and everything else that we all lost as U.S. citizens. I had also almost lost my life.

Energetic imbalances began expressing symptoms through my heart and spleen, shaking my sense of self and ability to metabolize information. It went on to affect my kidneys and liver, filling me with an underlying sense of dread and the inability to either express my emotions or resolve them. Breathing was difficult as *qi* congested in the channels. My lungs responded to my contracted breath and sadness with an upper respiratory infection. The lung crack on my tongue was wider than it had been a year before. Everyone in this country has a 9/11 story that reveals trauma's energetic dynamics. Do you recall yours?

We end the decade with one of the most profound financial challenges the nation has ever faced. What is the recovery process that the media and think-tanks continue to monitor? It is, in part, the healing process from another national trauma. How quickly do we as individuals and a nation open our wallets and let go of survival fears? That depends upon our collective ability to nourish ourselves and one another as we heal or suppress the traumas we have experienced for the past few years. The energetic dynamics of this force have unique qualities and affect every person differently, depending upon their individual strengths and weaknesses. However, there are some consistencies that identify its toxic presence.

Trauma acts like a wave of *qi* moving from the surface of the body to the interior. Many patients can describe the rolling feeling that passed through them at the time of the damaging event. Both physical and emotional trauma can be accompanied by an immediate denial of injury. I call it the "I'm fine" syndrome. Before victims notice a severe injury, those who rush to their aid are assured that they are "fine."

Depending upon the severity and location of the injury (i.e., tennis elbow or heartbreak), trauma's residue can show up in an instant or seep into the joints, organs, emotions, bone or blood over decades. All the organs and many forms of *qi* play a role in the body's ability to create, be affected by, and minimize trauma. When looking for trauma residue, take a thorough history and listen carefully. Trauma will have its most disastrous effects at the weak links in your patient's body.

Wei qi is our defense against any external force entering the body. Trauma's ability to affect us is, in part, determined by the strength of an individual's shield. One of my teachers described the protective dome of *wei qi*. "The helmet rests on CV17 in the front and GV14 in the back. It extends out several inches from the body like an astronaut's helmet. You must tell your patients to always keep the area between these two points (the head and neck) protected because only the strength of this shield keeps them from the elements of life."

Of course *wei qi* protects the entire body, not just the head and neck. It can be protective against some traumatic events such as mild physical injuries. However, it can be of no use at all when some forms of trauma strike. An example occurs when you are in the middle of eating a meal and you learn some horrible news. The strong emotions that burst open in you directly affects the liver and its actions upon the stomach. As *qi* stops moving (*qi* movement being a liver function), everything in your stomach stops being digested. *Qi* sits, like a rock, unmoving. In this case, *wei qi* could do very little to protect you, and the trauma will have to be addressed through the organs as well as *wei qi* supportive points.

The liver cleanses and moves everything that comes into the body. When trauma gets in and causes stagnation, it is the liver's duty to rally against it. Liver *wei qi* is always affected. All the meridians can actually show signs of trauma because the disorganized *qi* creates chaos in the body through them.

While the multiplicity of faces worn by this hidden pathogenic factor may confuse the practitioner initially, there are methods by which this force can be discerned and overpowered. We may take

different kinds of hits than those first treated by our professional ancestors, but our medicine is large and has genius enough to address all insults that life has to offer.

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