

Self Care for Acupuncturists

Denise Cicuto, LAc

The old saying "Healer, heal thyself" is so very important for acupuncturists. You may have some very difficult cases. Sometimes people seek out acupuncture as a last attempt when other options have failed them. We must take care of ourselves as we help others to do the same. Here are some suggestions to help you do that.

Some of these are suggestions you make to your patients; they're just as important for you. Hopefully this will serve as a reminder of things you already know how to do to strengthen your immune system, relieve stress and help you enjoy what you do every day.

Start your day out right; get to work early. It's the little things that add up over the course of a day. If you run late to work, it may affect the flow of the rest of your day and add to your stress level. By getting to work even a little early, you may have time to do some *qi gong*, review patient files, have a cup of tea and relax before your first appointment. It really makes a difference.

Practice what you preach. You may advise your patients to take herbs, or show them how to moxa Stomach 36 at home. You may give your patients Chinese nutrition advice for their constitution. Do you do similar things for yourself? Do you remember to eat nourishing food? Are you getting enough exercise? Are you getting enough restful sleep? Are you doing what you can to make sure you stay healthy? Do you have a regular *qi* development practice? Be it *qi gong*, tai chi, yoga or walking along the beach, it's really important to establish a regular practice and make sure you don't deplete your reserves. This may be easy to do while you're in acupuncture school and required to take *qi* classes, but it's also vitally important to continue a *qi* practice for the rest of your life. Look around your community and try different classes until you find what's right for you. Taking a *qi* development class may also give you the opportunity to give a talk about acupuncture at that *qi* studio or health center.



Schedule your fun. Being an acupuncturist is the best job in the world but everyone needs some downtime. While I was in school, Laraine Crampton, an acupuncturist in Santa Monica, Calif., reminded me to schedule time off. She pointed out: "This is a big assist in preventing burnout, say, during senior internship, or in the first years of starting a practice, when the tendency is to focus all of one's interest, time and energy on getting things going, making it work, showing up."

Establish good work boundaries. This is important in a lot of different realms. One of them is how you outwardly present yourself to your patients. Only you can decide if you want to be the casual acupuncturist who wears jeans and t-shirts to work or the more formal acupuncturist who wears a lab coat. You could also choose something completely different. How does your wardrobe help with self-care? It's a way to separate the work you from the off-duty you. It's also about creating a "uniform" that represents "Jane Doe, LAc." Remember, it's not just about your own personal style; it's about establishing yourself as a health care professional and an authority figure in the eyes of your patients. Your clothing and demeanor also help create a boundary of safety for both you and your patients.

Boundaries in the digital realm. My iPhone makes it possible for me to always be in contact with my patients and get back to potential new patients. I can respond to e-mail and voicemails really quickly, research and order formulas online, all in the palm of my hand. Being so connected is great for a lot of reasons, except at 10 pm or when I'm away on vacation. A good friend of mine also reminded me a long time ago not to answer the phone during dinner. I've learned the hard way not to look at or answer my work e-mail before or after a certain time of day. When I'm away on vacation, I make sure I set an "away message" and that I turn off my phone.

It's OK to take a sick day. Really, it is. I know it's hard because a lot of us are self-employed and no one is going to pay us if we take a day off. However, just like our patients, we're human and sometimes that means we get sick. It's sometimes best to stay in bed, rest, take your herbs and keep your germs away from your coworkers and patients. You can't be the doctor and patient at the same time. You may have a wind-heat and take some *Yin Qiao San*, then you're all better within a day. That's great but sometimes you have to see another health care practitioner because you need a different perspective. Be sure to see other acupuncturists on a regular basis and other health care providers as needed. This will also give you an opportunity to try different modalities first-hand. It also gives you the chance to network with other alternative health care providers such as massage therapists, chiropractors, etc.

Vaccinations. I know this may be a topic of controversy. Not everyone gets them or believes in them. However, as health care workers, we are at the top of the list for the opportunity to get the H1N1 vaccine. I have patients ranging from 3 to 85 years old, some of whom have compromised immune systems. I have seen quite a few cases of (suspected) H1N1 in the past year. I decided that the responsible thing to do for myself and for my patients was to get the vaccine.

You may work with people with really serious illnesses or complex cases. I have a monthly volunteer shift at a clinic that serves women with cancer. Some shifts are more difficult than others but since my first day there, I made sure I had a friend or a loved one available to give me a hug afterwards. It's really been invaluable to me. Laraine Crampton has had extensive experience working with people with cancer. Here are her top suggestions of what you should do when working at an oncology center or with seriously ill patients. You can really apply these to working with all of your patients.

1. Do not resist or shrink away from whatever the patient presents, whether it is pain, deformity or appalling illness. If you go around gagging because you are horrified by your patients' chemo sickness, you create a hard time for yourself. At the same time, do not invite that *qi* deviation into your body or spirit by identifying too strongly with it. Just observe, accept and be clear.
2. Develop the daily habit of cleansing your energy and refining it every morning with *qi gong* and tai chi, and establishing an energetic shield before beginning to work with patients, whether they are very ill or just have a sprained ankle or common cold. [Dr. Maoshing Ni](#) has taught a shielding practice at Yo San University for preventing pathogenic transference, and it is a very good assist.
3. Do not buy into the atmosphere of fear that conventional oncology centers sometimes are saturated with--health care practitioners sometimes don't know how to elicit cooperation from the patients without making them fearful that if they don't take a particular course of action that they will die. This is not good for the patients, the practitioners, or anyone who comes in contact with the center or the participants."

Clear the air. Talk to your colleagues. Sometimes you need to discuss a case with another acupuncturist or you may need someone to listen when you've had a rough day. Working in the field that we do means that we must maintain patients' privacy. You can still do this with a colleague while maintaining patient confidentiality. Communicating with others is a good practice for health care providers because it allows us to alleviate some stress. In the case of consultation, this allows for confirmation of action or perhaps a new viewpoint that would allow for better health of the patient.

As acupuncturists, we help people take care of themselves. Isn't it just as important that we do the same for ourselves? In order to keep ourselves healthy and to help us do the best job we can, it's

important to take time out for us. There are many ways to do this. It's not just about getting through the workday but about making all aspects of your life happy, healthy, safe and rewarding. Be well.

JULY 2010