

Acupuncture Solutions for the High Cost of Obesity

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In March of this year, *AT* contributor Sara Calabro had a nice article on acupuncture for weight loss, focusing on Western approaches, Oriental theory and acupuncture protocols. I'd like to take this a step further and look at the cost and environmental impact of obesity. We are a fat nation (33% of adults), getting fatter (17% of our children), and this is something we all have to pay for.

How much do we pay? Healthcare costs associated with obesity are almost \$150 billion annually, according to the Center for Disease Control. According to TV personality Dr. Oz, the cost over an obese person's lifetime is \$258,000 more than a non-obese person. The World Health Bank estimates 12% of the U.S. healthcare budget is spent treating obesity related diseases. Apparently supersizing a meal has a hidden price.

Obesity also has a direct effect on the environment. Heavier people move less and drive more, not only consuming more fuel, but needing extra fuel to propel them because they are heavier. It is estimated that obesity causes one billion extra tons of greenhouse gas emissions annually because of this. They also use extra fuel for air travel resulting in higher airline costs.



Statistically, obese people consume 19% more foods daily. This means more meat consumption creating higher greenhouse effects; more pesticides and agrichemicals used to produce food; more fuel to transport these extra foods; and more waste such as soda bottles. Unfortunately, obesity is on the rise all over the world and it's estimated that one and a half billion people are obese worldwide. What is going to happen to the environment as the rest of the world adopts our lifestyle and habits?

These costs also extend to lost productivity in the work force. It is estimated \$47 billion is lost annually from indirect causes such as inefficiency and absenteeism among overweight workers. These losses affect the overweight as well. Obese people earn less and pay more for insurance.

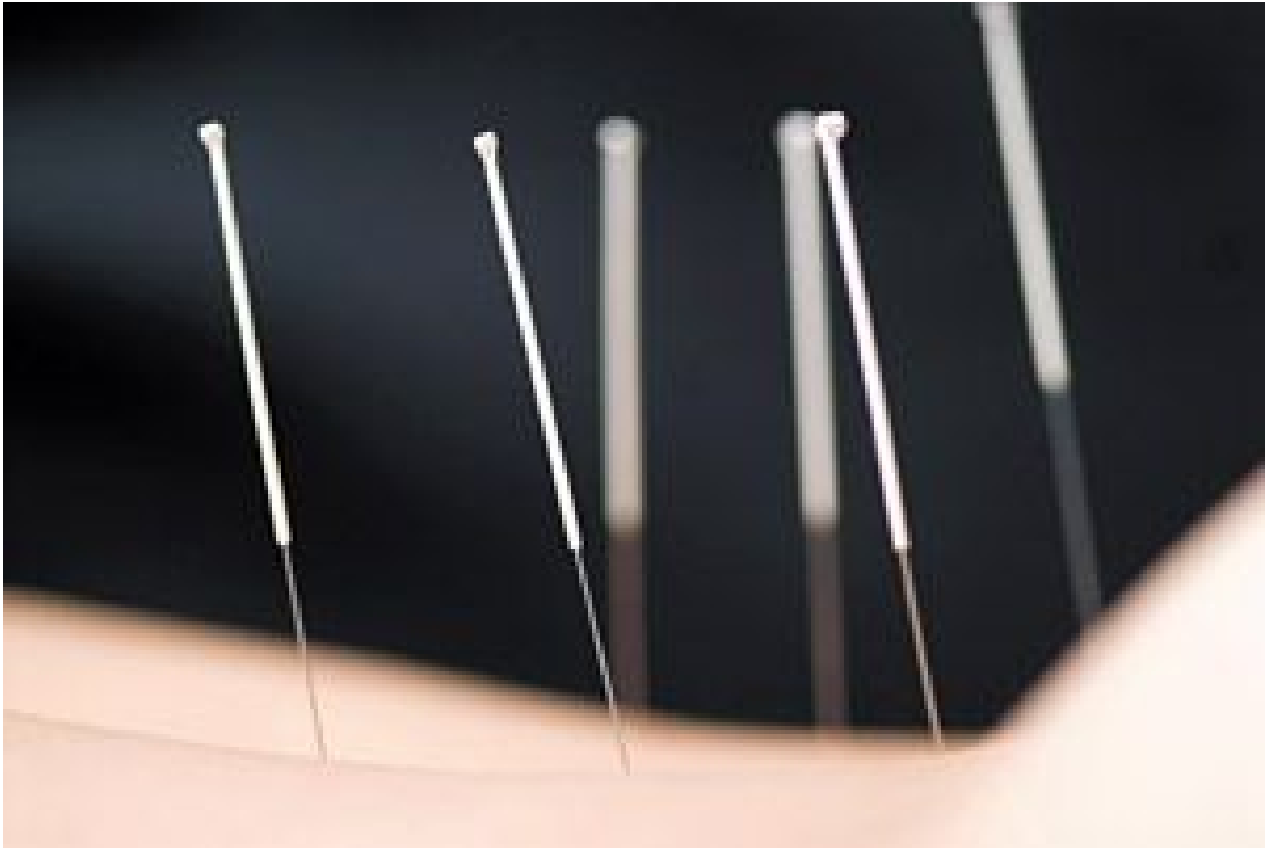
Obesity in this country exists for some simple reasons and some not so simple reasons. The simple ones include eating too much fast and prepared foods; having excess high-calorie, nutrient-deficient, sugar-laden drinks; too little exercise and too much television and computer time. The not so simple involve the spirit and *shen*. In most every case there is an emotional component. Food and mood go hand-in-hand.

Our heart center gives us a more conscious soul connection. Heart disease was previously considered the No. 1 killer. This can be viewed as the patient not connected to the *shen*. But, obesity is now considered the No. 1 killer, because it leads to so many diseases such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, asthma, sleep apnea and heart diseases. Not only are we not connected to the *shen*, now we are literally covering it up.

As acupuncturists we have the tools and potential to treat weight loss. I couldn't count how many times I've had someone ask me, "Is there a point for weight loss?" As if there's some secret point that I can needle to make them magically deflate. Can we help obesity? Absolutely! We can strengthen their digestive system (through the Earth systems), work on will power (*zhi*), reducing cravings and support with herbs, but the needles can only do so much. They're the ones home alone at night in front of the refrigerator making decisions.

Obesity kills over 300,000 people a year in the United States. We have the ability to help save people's lives, protect the environment and save billions of dollars on healthcare. However, telling someone to just lose weight will never work. Almost \$60 billion a year are spent in the U.S. for weight loss and weight loss related products. This number goes up every year while the amount of obese people simultaneously rises. Obviously something is not working and people are desperate.

I used to get excited when a patient came to me for weight loss. I'd talk about food choices, treatment and exercise. But just like most diets, people start out strong and end weak, next thing you know they are not coming back to see you. I then went through a period when I didn't get excited and thought, "This isn't worth my time." But, now I get excited again. I've learned that the needles and my enthusiasm aren't enough and the only thing that works is if the patient sees results.



I see my main role now as someone that will hold their feet to the fire, and the acupuncture as a supporting tool. If a new patient will not commit to making at least small changes, I refuse to work with them and tell them to come back when they are ready. This weeds out the ones that are merely playing at losing weight and I'm left with a more exciting patient to work with. I then start slowly asking them to make one change a week or month. Basics include: drinking the proper amount of water; starting to exercise (even if it is only walking one day a week), small changes to their diet, keeping a food journal. I also recommend at least taking a picture of themselves in a bathing suit and hanging it where they can see it, along with a regular weigh-in.

People say all the time, "I can't lose weight, I've tried everything." That really isn't true, they just haven't found what works for them yet. Seeing results moves their mindset from one of discipline and dread to motivation and enthusiasm. Discipline will only take you so far, but when you start to see results, you become motivated. When people start to plateau, think of treating the *shen* because eventually it will surface, and make the patient responsible for his or her behavior. Only when a patient changes will they see change in their life.

Personal and environmental changes are not easy. In evolutionary terms, the old always fights the new. As we grow aware individually, we grow together as a society. The Earth, food, economics, politics, health and social demographics all go hand in hand; and things are changing. As we heal ourselves we heal the Earth and vice versa. We can be a driving force in this much needed social movement by dealing with the patients that sit down with us everyday.

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