

Minimalist Acupuncture, With or Without Needles, in Palliative, Hospice & Grief Care

DIGITAL EXCLUSIVE

It is such an honor to walk the last few weeks of a life with patients and their families. A few needles, some tuning forks, compassionate attentiveness toward all of those in attendance can go a long way in easing the suffering of inhabiting and caring for a failing body. Here in the state of Texas, this service is rarely requested; consequently, I seldom get this privilege. There is much work to be done in enhancing awareness about the many gifts of the wisdom of acupuncture, with or without needles, in this realm.

Needles Aren't Your Only Option

If a patient has never experienced acupuncture prior to hospice and they - or their caregivers - are wary of needles, this is not the time to push the comfort zone. Needles may be tiny, but reasoning with a lifetime of guardedness toward needles is neither compassionate nor appropriate in this setting.

There are many other tools that we may use to help energy flow more smoothly. If this were the situation, I would choose tuning forks or shiatsu to address concerns in all realms: physical, psycho-emotional, spiritual and communal. Applying tuning forks to 4 Gates, to Gushing Spring (Kidney 1), to REN 17 and YinTang is very soothing. It is completely non-invasive and non-threatening.

The use of tuning forks in healing modalities peaks people's curiosity, which allows me to offer an experience of this soothing protocol to caregivers and even children, if they would like. Helping others in the environment to be calm and peaceful is as much a treatment for the patient as it is for them. To me, it is equally important to address the flow of energy between and within the beings in the patient's family or community, as it is to ease flow within the patient.

Effort and Attitude Matter Most

Over the years, I have had the privilege of taking several workshops with Pamela Ferguson in applying shiatsu in the context of hospice care, pediatrics and trauma. From Pamela, I have gained a deep appreciation for simplicity and pragmatism.

The other precious wisdom I have gained from Pamela is a lightness of not only touch, but also effort and attitude. Less is more, playfulness more effective than ardor; the effortless effort reminiscent of Wu Wei, all rooted in the guiding wisdom of acupuncture in its broadest application. These principles are at the base of every interaction I offer and it is my observation that they are powerful and empowering to caregivers, who wish to be fully present and hold the sacred space with their loved one.

The simplest of ever-so-gentle contact at P6 and P8 with the thumb and middle finger, thumbs gently touching at Kidney 1 or a gentle stroke down the yang channels and up the medial channels on the lower legs can be incredibly nourishing.

An Example of Compassionate Hospice Care

As acupuncture becomes more commonly integrated into oncology to address the side effects of radiation and chemo, more people entering hospice have an embodied experience of its therapeutic value. They already are aware that the sensations of an acupuncture needle bare not even the faintest resemblance to a hypodermic needle.

I recently had the opportunity to serve someone who had discovered the therapeutic nature of acupuncture needles along his journey with cancer. He was excited and very receptive to receiving this kind of care, even and especially as his body became more depleted.

The fewest number of the tiniest needles inserted at the most superficial depth in combination with tuning forks proved tremendously effective at restoring bowel function made sluggish by morphine; and easing the frustration of his diminishing ability to do all he wanted to do. They eased abdominal pressure, labored and painful breath, and soothed a very sore throat, enabling him to once again swallow his medications.

His caregiver shared the space and her energy, partaking of NADA and calling on her longtime meditation practice while I treated him. On occasion, I would also apply the vibration of the tuning forks on *her*, non-verbally encouraging her to notice subtle tension in her fascia and a ";letting go." None of our meetings was about killing his cancer. They were about providing a gentle, peaceful transition, both for him and his family.

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