

Scattered Qi: Treating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder With Herbs - Case Study

Candace Quinn, LAc, Dipl. OM, MSAOM, PhD

Four years ago, I began providing acupuncture treatments to a retired Army Ranger who had been shot four times in Vietnam. As the treatments continued and his pain was relieved, we began to address other issues. I learned that the patient had been diagnosed by the VA with PTSD and met all DSM-5 criteria for PTSD. Acupuncture had not improved the patient's PTSD symptoms, so I began to think more about how to map PTSD into a TCM framework and about how it might be treated with herbs. I remembered two things:

One was an experience eight or nine years ago following a very upsetting interaction with a family member. That evening, I took a commercial Chinese herbal sleep formula. Normally, the incident would have been on my mind for several weeks, but the next morning I felt calm and centered. I could clearly remember all that was said, but there was little emotion attached to it. Today, I cannot recall the subject of the altercation, but have remembered that formula and its effect.

The second was a conversation about PTSD with a professor during an internship at the Canandaigua, N.Y., VA hospital. He explained that a sudden, violent event can cause a person's *qi* to be scattered. Often this scattered *qi* naturally coalesces as the person recovers, but sometimes the *qi* remains scattered and the heart / *shen* is disturbed.¹

In this situation, the person relies on willpower (kidney / *zhi*) to cope with everyday life and struggles with PTSD symptoms such as dream-disturbed sleep, anxiety, fear, aggression, flashbacks, and intrusive thoughts and memories.

The Power of Chinese Herbs

Certain combinations of Chinese herbs have the ability to gather and coalesce the scattered *qi*, settling and anchoring it back into its normal circulation to restore equilibrium. Chinese herbs can quickly and effectively consolidate *qi* (3-5 g of granules on two consecutive nights), even after decades of suffering. The following Chinese herbal formula has been successful in treating PTSD in both civilians and veterans. (See Table 1)

Herb	Grams	Channels	Function in this Formula
<i>Suan Zao Ren / Ziziphus spinosa</i>	30	HT, LR SP, GB	Nourishes heart <i>yin</i> and blood, quiets the spirit, gathers <i>qi</i>
<i>Bai Zi Ren / Arborvitae seed</i>	16	HT, KD, LI	Nourishes the heart, calms the spirit, gathers <i>qi</i>
<i>Zhen Zhu Mu / mother of pearl</i>	15	HT, LR	Sedates fright, calms the spirit, anchors <i>yang</i>
<i>He Huan Pi / mimosa bark</i>	9	HT, LR	Calms the spirit and relieves constraint

<i>Chuan Xiong / Ligustum cnidium</i>	9	LR, GB, P, SJ	Harmonizes blood, relieves headache
<i>Ye Jiao Teng / Caulis spatholobi</i>	9	HT, LR	Nourishes blood, calms spirit, unblocks channels
Fu Shen / <i>Sclerotium poriae</i>	6	HT, SP, LU, KD	Calms the heart
<i>Gan Cao / licorice root</i>	6	All 12	Harmonizes herbs, nourishes blood and qi

Gathering Qi Herbal Formula

The *dui yao* of *suan zao ren* and *bai zi ren* constitute the chief herbs in the formula. They have a much greater effect on consolidating *qi* than either herb alone.²⁻³

One of the heavy sedative herbs, *zhen zhu mu* in this case, is necessary to anchor the collected *qi* so the effects of the formula will be long-lasting.

He huan pi enters the heart and liver, and is important because it relieves some of the constraint that has been imposed by the kidney/ *zhi* in its attempt to "keep everything together."

Comparison of Formulae

This granular formula is related to the sedative formulas that calm the spirit,⁴ such as *Tian Wang Bu Xin Dan*, *Zhen Zhu Mu Wan*, and the commercial sleep formula I took eight years ago. Some of these formulae are widely used as sleep aids and are very safe (assuming you avoid traditional formulas with toxic heavy metals such as cinnabar / *zhu sha*.) (See Table 2)

	Function	Tian Wang Bu Xin Dan	Zhen Zhu Mu Wan	Sleep Formula	Gathering Qi Formula
<i>Suan Zao Ren</i>	Gather <i>qi</i> / calm <i>shen</i>	9%	11%	30%	30%
<i>Bai Zi Ren</i>	Gather <i>qi</i> / calm <i>shen</i>	9%	11%	15%	16%
<i>Fu Shen</i> / <i>Fu Ling</i>	Calm <i>shen</i>	5% <i>Fu Ling</i>	6% <i>Fu Shen</i>	6% <i>Fu Ling</i>	6% <i>Fu Shen</i>
<i>Zhen Zhu Mu</i>	Anchor <i>qi</i>	None	9%	10%	15%
Long Chi	Anchor <i>qi</i>	None	6%	None	None
Total Herbs in Formula		13	10; omit rhino horn	10	8
Gathers and anchors <i>qi</i> ?		No. Relies heavily on nourishing blood.	Not tested. May need more <i>suan zao ren</i> .	yes	yes

The Case Study

A 69-year-old male, retired Army Ranger, shot four times in Vietnam, was being treated with acupuncture for chronic pain from his war injuries and from more recent surgeries. He took the Gathering Qi formula, 5 g of granules at bedtime, on two consecutive nights in February 2020. He

requested a second dose for two nights a month later. Some of the changes in his mood and emotions are summarized in Table 3.

PTSD Symptoms	Before Taking Herbs	10 mo. After Taking Herbs
Unwanted upsetting memories	Daily	None
Flashbacks	Two out of three days	Seems very distant
Emotional distress after exposure to traumatic reminders	Children, helicopters	Seems distant and surreal
Overly negative thoughts and assumptions about oneself or the world	Always know the evil men do; feel that things are my fault	Somehow seem to be at peace with things
Irritability or aggression	Guard myself	No feeling of aggression
Difficulty concentrating	Yes	Much better
Difficulty sleeping	Yes	Sleep better
Other symptoms?	Sadness, guilt, no hope	Calm, happy maybe
How long have symptoms lasted?	1970 to 2020	They seem far away, like I'd need binoculars to see them

The patient in this case study was taking no narcotic pain relievers, no psychotropic drugs (prescription or otherwise) and does not drink. The presence of drugs or alcohol may interfere with the efficacy of the Gathering Qi formula.

You will find that not everyone diagnosed with PTSD has scattered *qi*. If the patient does not, they will only experience a better night's sleep with this herbal formula. If they do have scattered *qi*, the results can be dramatic.

Hopefully this example will encourage other practitioners to, in the spirit of *Shen Nong*, combine their learning and their own experiences with herbs to find additional ways to help their patients.

References

1. Private communication with Prof. Kevin Ergil during internship at Canandaigua, N.Y., VA hospital.
2. www.mayway.com/articles/herbalist-corner-suan-zao-ren-bai-zi-ren: Mark Frost, herbal chair at the American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, discussing *Suan Zao Ren* and *Bai Zi Ren*, including their TCM functions and how to select the best herb for your patients.
3. Confirmed by trying them on myself.
4. Chen KJ, Chen TT. *Chinese Herbal Formulas and Applications*. Art of Medicine Press, 2009: pp. 710-721.

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