



BACK PAIN

"My Back Is Killing Me!"

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"My back is killing me!" Haven't we all heard that countless times? And not just in our clinical practice, classrooms, at dinner parties, out shopping, or during phone calls with friends and family. How many of us stop in our tracks to offer help on the spot?

I've shared various examples of my spontaneous sessions (from a deli floor in New York City to a bank teller's chair in Rome) in previous columns.¹⁻² Some of you asked me to share yet more tips to deal swiftly with niggling back pains that don't mask a serious health issue. The following tips can be integrated with most forms of ABT, and as a prelim to needling where appropriate.

The "Frisk" Position

Yes indeed – the receiver is pressed up against the wall, arms and legs outstretched. This is a great way to apply pressure-counterpressure. Involve the receiver in a visual "waterfall" of *qi* from neck to ankles. Initially, do a "*qi* sweep" with your flat hands along either side of the spine, and then down the back of each leg so you have a quick insight into UB blocks, distortions or painful areas from neck to ankle.

Repeat a couple of times. Then do a subtle diagonal stretch with one hand on the receiver's butt, and the other on the opposite shoulder blade.

Return to areas that seem to "call you." Make a note of any specific back *shu* point involvements worth discussing with the receiver. That in itself will help ease tension.

Then start thumbing down UB on either side of the spine; or utilize the "pinch" or "squeeze" technique: one hand supporting the lower back, the other "pinching" the UB on either side of the spine between your thumb and the knuckle of your first finger.

This "two-handed" technique, a classic in zen *shiatsu*, provides harmony between the "moving" hand and the "listening" hand. Easy to perform. Very comfortable for the receiver. Followed by a

simple palming down the legs and finally, a slow pinch of the Achilles, the UB 60 / K 3 area.

UB 36, in the middle of the gluteal fold, zaps lower back pain. Sink your thumbs bilaterally into those points with a slight lifting technique, with your fingers pointed upwards. Also a great way to ease sciatic pain. Pinching the Achilles and applying upward pressure to UB 36 simultaneously is also a great way to ease lower back pain.

Don't Forget to Ask the Receiver to Stretch!

Between each technique, ask the receiver to step away from the wall to do some simple *qi* stretches in slow motion. Deep breathing helps throughout, as a lot of folks tend to hold their breath while you work on them, and that's counterproductive.

Yes, I've used the "frisk" position in classrooms, offices, airports, in public during political demonstrations, in cafes, and in clinical practice, especially on clients experiencing computer overload! Often, 10 minutes work like a charm, especially in a crowded or busy situation.

Techniques During Pregnancy or Labor?

When your pregnant client is in the supine position, knees atop a pillow, it's helpful to reach under her back, keeping your hands flat on the table, fingertips raised to apply pressure down the UB meridian. Her bodyweight does the work.

It's a very effective technique to give, but remember your hands need to be flat on the futon or table under the receiver at all times so you don't strain your wrists. .

I have done this successfully in any situation in which the receiver cannot lie in the prone or side positions. I have also performed this hour after hour during a long labor, pausing during contractions, and then continuing before the next contraction. Again, feedback is crucial. In some instances your client might ask you to pause in one section of her back. In other situations she may ask you to keep applying pressure to one point after another.

Side Positioning

Very comfy for folks unable to lie in either prone or supine, and/or/if you also need good access to GB meridians. Make sure the receiver's upper leg is bent and resting on a pillow for stability. Some receivers also like to hug an additional pillow.

Also a good technique during pregnancy. Great stretch for the lumbar region and a good way to thumb around the sacrum, where we all carry a lot of tension and "pooled" *qi*.

Stretches in the Side Position

Rest both elbows, palms up, in the middle of the torso and then move your hands apart and swivel your hands around, palms down, to maximize a wonderful side stretch. Repeat a couple of times. Then palm down either side of the spine to enhance *qi* flow along the UB meridian. Note which back *shu* points seem to "hold" you, ask you to pause. And communicate with the receiver to gain more information about the specific areas that add relief - or discomfort.

Once the receiver seems more flexible, lean over, cup their knee in your elbow, and rotate the hip. Your opposite hand provides pressure on the sacrum. Bring the knee up as high as possible according to the receiver's comfort level. And do everything in slow motion.

Chairwork in Public: Don't Forget to Ask Questions

I recall a moment at an open house when several bodyworkers were giving volunteer chair sessions. A young woman cried out in pain when a teacher started to perform some vigorous wrist-rolling *tuina* down her back. He'd neglected to ask her some basic questions about injuries, surgeries, chronic problems etc. It turned she had cancer of the spine, but alas, hadn't said anything.

Even in a public situation, it's helpful to engage the receiver in simple "backtalk" while running a hand gently down his/her spine. It's also good to have a demo spine on display (if it's a school) or at least a colorful anatomy book or open laptop program to discuss both anatomical and acupoint associations.

It's always helpful to start chairwork with some thumb pressure along the shoulders (pausing in GB 21) and thumbing around the T1-T3 zone to ease upper back tension. Also a great technique to release the first glimmerings of a headache.

Bob the Lawn Guy

When I noticed Bob struggling with his lawn mower, I invited him to my next class so we could work on his back, and demo some useful lifting and movement techniques. I had also noted Bob and his guys quaffing one iced Coke after another while working along the block.

I suggested he fill his cooler with bottled water, flat and sparkling. He did this and included green tea. Within a couple of weeks he told me his back pain had eased and he no longer experienced sugar lows.

Jack and Jill Decide to Buy a New Mattress

Friends of mine were both experiencing back pain, so I offered to make a house call on my way home one evening. I walked into their bedroom and checked their futon.

"Seriously?" I laughed. "You're sleeping on this lumpy old futon and wonder why you wake up each morning with back pain?" They stared at me.

"But that's our wonderful college futon!" Jack wailed. "Our first love nest!"

"It saw us through graduate school," said Jill.

"We can't just toss it away!" said Jack.

"Compromise?" I suggested. "Convert it into a snug corner loveseat for you and the dogs. Drape it with colorful rugs and cushions. Don't waste money paying me for *shiatsu*; treat yourselves to a new futon or mattress instead!"

They did - and were amazed at how quickly their back pains vanished!

References

1. Ferguson PE. "Quick Fix Anyone?" *Acupuncture Today*, March 2023.
2. Ferguson PE. "On the Road With ABT." *Acupuncture Today*, May 2022.

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