

## EDUCATION AND SEMINARS



PATIENT EDUCATION

# Emotional Healing and AOM

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As a licensed clinical social worker who worked as a psychotherapist for 18 years before I decided to study Chinese medicine, I spent years listening to people talk about the emotional challenges in their lives. Over the years I've been practicing Chinese medicine, I've treated a good number of people suffering from depression, panic attacks, anxiety, and people wanting relief from stressful crises in their lives.

Therapists in my community have learned that I might be able to help their client who seems stuck, and has not had a satisfying response to psychotropic medications. Some prospective clients, seeing the two licenses listed on my brochure or card (acupuncture and social work), imagine they might get two professionals for the price of one, and sometimes, that is what happens.

To be clear, acupuncture is not an alternative to therapy, but rather, acupuncture is an excellent complement that supports the healing work done in therapy. When a person comes into my office presenting a complex and persistent pattern of behaving in a way that undermines their progress and deepens feelings of low self-esteem, a course of therapy is usually needed to help the person learn more effective strategies to deal with their lives. Acupuncture can be one of those strategies. I do believe that treatment with Chinese medicine is frequently a more effective alternative to psychotropic medications, especially for people whose complaints and symptoms are not too severe.

## Medication Has a Role

Please don't think I'm saying that psychotropic medications never have a useful role; there are serious situations where an experienced psychiatrist can prescribe a powerful drug or combination of drugs which can save a life. Acute psychotic episodes where a person feels extremely suicidal may be controlled more easily with drugs than with acupuncture and herbs.

I'm not the first person to claim that anti-depressants are over-prescribed in our society. People who complain to their western medicine doctor of feeling low (often with good reason, after the death of a loved one or the break-up of a committed love relationship) may be prescribed a drug because that's something the doctor can do in a brief visit, and the patient is expecting some tangible "help." A prescription may be interpreted as "help." And, it's possible that the drug may cause a different problem (loss of libido is common), while not addressing the person's actual condition, which might just be needing somebody to listen to and witness their pain and grief.

The issue is not so much the substance itself (which can be useful when carefully prescribed) as it is the careless and hurried treatment. And, in some medical practices, this may not be as much the doctor's fault as the fault of the economic imperatives of practicing medicine in 2011. As with any western disease entity, when we hear what our client reports their doctor said about their condition: (migraine, arthritis, bipolar disorder), we treat what the person presents us with (wiry pulse, deficient in proximal position on left hand-red tongue with peeled coating), doing our best to catalyze a change toward greater balance and harmony.

### Caring Words

As we work with a person over a longer period of time, we become more familiar with who the person is (and whether the person feels less than, or stymied from becoming who he or she wants to be).

Some acupuncturists, not understanding the persistence of pathological patterns of thinking and behaving, might say things to clients with serious chronic problems that could be taken to be judging the person. A person who feels so unsafe that he or she has never relaxed may have a history of terrible abuse. A more useful attitude is one of curiosity, warmth, and being open to be of help, no matter how stuck the client is.

It can be valuable to say the obvious thing that others may not say. When I met an adolescent boy, refusing to make eye contact with me as his mother pulled him into my office, I said, "You look like you'd rather not be here." He looked at me and nodded. After an hour of my paying attention to him, he chose to come back to see me regularly. People like to be noticed, and most people appreciate the truth, if it comes with caring. Chinese medicine can offer a great deal to people suffering from depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and living with major life stress.

### Your Comfort Zone Matters

Acupuncturists have a role to play in emotional healing, and reaching out to mental health counselors with information about the benefits of Chinese medicine can become a source of referrals. Pay attention to when a certain type of client causes you to feel outside your own comfort zone. Some of us might hesitate before treating a client with Dissociative (Multiple Personality) Disorder. Some of us have treated many people struggling with addictions, while others of us may have judgments about addicts, and find it difficult to maintain the open, compassionate attitude we want to have toward a person whose behavior has been self-destructive, and harmful to family members.

As a social worker, I received supervision whenever I worked in an agency, so that I could talk with an experienced clinician about what came up for me in working with challenging clients. I was surprised to find when I first treated clients in a student clinic, that the focus was just on diagnosis and treatment, rather than giving adequate attention to the practitioner's own response to difficult clients. I have sought out colleagues to consult about clients I feel the need to talk about, so that I can be more

clear about what reactions they are bringing forth in me, and how their habits of interacting may push away all sorts of people in their lives.

Treatments are likely to be more effective when the practitioner feels relaxed, attentive, comfortable regardless of the client's discomfort, and focused on what actions can be taken to contribute to a healing encounter. Sometimes we need to move our own qi to be most effective in moving our clients' qi.

Practitioners of Chinese medicine have more tools available than psychotherapists do to help our clients suffering from emotional pain. An acupuncture treatment can give the person an experience of balance and relaxation. A qi gong practice can empower a person to embody flowing, calm movement - no matter what stressors are creating challenges in his or her personal life. We can gain satisfaction in our work as we see the ways that Chinese medicine can help to heal all sorts of emotional imbalances as well as physical complaints.

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