



GENERAL ACUPUNCTURE

## Qigong for Substance Abuse

It is commonly believed that substance abuse, in addition to harming one's physiological state, hurts the spirit. There is also a belief that one's spirit does not weaken due to substance abuse, but rather, the person finds solace in addiction due to an already weak spirit.

Substance abuse has become an epidemic in this country. There are multiple ways one can become an addict— the classic narrative, a rough childhood and bad influences drive one to depend upon street drugs and alcohol. Also, to consider is the accessibility and often low cost of dangerous and deadly drugs. There are newer synthetic drugs such as flakka and bath salts, as well as the classics: meth, heroin, crack cocaine, and LSD. Even still, there is a newer wave of addiction happening with pharmaceuticals— pain relief pills, Adderall, Xanax, SSRIs, and other psychoactive medications, which housewives, children, and even post-surgical patients can all fall victim to.

Very often, when a patient is admitted into a detox clinic, they have already been using a variety of drugs. One addiction leads to another, and often, it leads to life on the street and/or prison. It is not unusual for a patient to travel from one detox center to another, and through recovery centers and psychiatric wards. I once met a young man who had already been a patient in 17 detox clinics and had served time in prison twice; he was only 26 years old. I recently discovered some statistics which indicate that 50 to 90 percent of patients relapse after their time in a recovery center.<sup>1,2</sup>



## Qigong VS. Nada

Traditionally, acupuncturists use the NADA (or National Acupuncture Detoxification Association) protocol in a substance abuse recovery setting. It is a very effective auricular treatment, and I see a number of great benefits from it. I always recommend incorporating it into your practice. But that is the only way we learn to provide for recovering addicts in a group setting. And no matter how effective it is, it is simply not enough.

When I was asked to teach Qigong in a residential substance abuse recovery setting, I was surprised. There are over 500 treatment centers in Palm Beach County alone. Some centers develop programs that are unique, both design and implementation. The center which contacted me concentrates on discovering a *hero archetype* for each of their patients. I believe in discovering personal power in every human being, and this concept struck a chord in me, so I resolved to learn more.

At acupuncture schools we learn Qigong. Some of us are lucky, and we end up meeting amazing teachers, learning a lot from them, and continuing our daily practice to better ourselves. Some of us stick with physical movement forms. Furthermore, some get invested in medical Qigong, seek further education in it, and use it in their clinical practice. In this article I will assume the reader has a basic knowledge of Qigong and will concentrate on the application of it in a substance abuse recovery setting.

## Spirituality and the Altered State

At times, while interacting with people in recovery, I sense a great desire— often not even explicitly expressed to connect to something bigger than themselves. After all, altered state experiences provide

just that; their pain and worries temporarily go away and all their responsibilities vanish. It is easier for mind and body to stay in an altered state, therefore their desire to remain there becomes overwhelming. This sort of psychological addiction is the crux of relapse; despite detoxification, the spiritual aspect of substance abuse is one of the largest driving factors that brings addicts back to their substances. To counter that, AA and NA make sure to emphasize a connection with God and spirituality.

We, as Oriental medicine doctors, have numerous great tools to help our patients recover their spirit, align themselves with their destiny, and discover their path in life. We use acupuncture, nutrition, lifestyle advice and so on. Some of us get very involved in spiritual guidance, and we note that it helps our patients tremendously. However, at this time, for various reasons, our Oriental model is not widely available in residential substance abuse recovery centers. But the great need of our patients to reconnect with their spirit remains. How can we help? When we are faced with the complexity of the mind, the body, and the spirit, the natural solution is to create an integrative approach to treatment, which is quite easy to implement in a clinical setting. But when we are limited to one modality in a group setting, we have to be very creative. I believe that Qigong can deliver this integrative approach.

### Choosing the Right Form

It is not surprising to find many Qigong forms being practiced worldwide. Even within one form, you can see multiple variations thanks to interpretations from different masters of a wide range of traditions, both medical and martial. When I received an invitation to teach Qigong at a residential substance abuse recovery setting for a group of young men, I had to contemplate which form would be most effective. Should it be the easiest form to learn? Perhaps, but after consideration I reasoned it should be one specialized for qi cultivation concentrating on the lower Dantien, like done in martial forms.

However, as I found out, every Qigong form delivers mind, body, and spirit healing (even if it is not described clearly in classical texts and interpretations.) When I practice one form for a long time, I begin to notice certain changes in my qi flow. Besides physical sensations, I experience a stronger connection to the divine in ways specific to the selected form. While practicing these forms, you are working with meridians and acupuncture points, and these influences affect the result of the practice. My training in the Five Element Acupuncture tradition influences the way I approach any treatment modality, including Qigong. Five Elements strongly emphasizes the spiritual and emotional aspect of health. In this way, in addition to specific treatment protocols, you learn the *spirit* of the points and meridians on the body. Each Qigong movement interpreted with such an approach becomes a metaphor to achieving harmony of mind, body and spirit.

In the substance abuse recovery program, I became a part of a team. I had to learn the ideology of the program I was integrating into. It influenced my approach and interaction with clients, and helped me to select the best Qigong form for the group, and to introduce it in a way that was conducive to the entire treatment process.

### Qigong at the Center

I teach Qigong to a group of 20 to 25 young men, all younger than 28. Some of them have muscular bodies. Some are very thin. Some are overweight, and some have an average build. They cover the whole spectrum of levels in education, occupations, creative talents, and so on. The majority of these guys boast tattoos, often covering most of their bodies. In my group, I notice their priorities— the way

they look, talk, and behave make it clear how they view the world. The group is not permanent, guys are shuffled to IOP (Intensive Outpatient Program) and new guys move into the residency program. My classes start at 9 a.m. and are conducted outdoors. The patients have to wear white martial arts uniforms, and I disallow smoking, eating, or drinking during my classes. The space is treated as a dojo, a sacred space.

I find many of my patients are not feeling well in the morning, they suffer from anxiety attacks, insomnia, and suffer the side effects of withdrawal. Although they look healthy, they are often quite weak and exhausted, both physically and mentally. That's not to mention that they are re-establishing their connection with God as they understand it; which is a journey on its own. Teaching Qigong to such a diverse and challenged population is not an easy task. I have to balance the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of the form, and make sure participants understand it and feel the energy flowing through their bodies. The program director of this recovery center commented, "Prior to this program they used to get wasted or do drugs every morning, now they are wearing white uniforms and practicing Qigong outdoors. What a change!"

I decided to choose forms related to martial arts because they are physically challenging, and at the same time, develop the spiritual qualities of the warrior such as opening the heart, shaping destiny, and so on. The greatest phenomenon of Qigong is its ability to harmoniously open up the places of power within and connect it to the power of the universe— the ultimate formula of the true power. This is the intention I set while selecting the form; for the physical aspect it has to be engaging but not too challenging. For example, balance-based poses like standing on one leg might discourage the group. I emphasize grounding and stretching stances, spinal stretches, fine movements, bursts of energy, and deep breathing. This form has to stretch their comfort zone just enough to create an interest in learning more. Therefore, clients who are training with me for a few weeks progress to a better and more challenging practice of the form.

## Spirituality

I cover mental and spiritual aspects at the same time. In this substance abuse recovery setting, they are especially intertwined. Any Qigong form has a spiritual component to it, and it must be communicated in a non-threatening approach to a client's spiritual beliefs. It is important to note that many clients, especially newcomers, are often confused, ashamed, and defensive. When fighting addiction there is a long road in discovering personal power and purpose, and to completely recover. Introducing a brand new spiritual modality at this point might be unnecessary, although after a few weeks of training, some clients show interest in learning more about cultivating their energy.

For the mental and spiritual aspects, Qigong helps clients understand their own current situation and offers a way to change it according to a set intention. During the training sessions I work with opening the Heart, stretching personal boundaries, re-shaping their destinies, aligning their hearts and willpowers, releasing their heavy burdens from the Heart, filling their Hearts with spiritual light, aligning their inner rhythms with natural forces, fighting their shadows, and replenishing their inner energy reservoirs with clean energy from Heaven and Earth.

During the class, I constantly assess the energy of the group. It is remarkable to observe the inner peace and concentration within each of them bringing their own life history and intentions into every move. With time, I tend to notice a various degree of energetic change in clients, with some of them stating that Qigong is their favorite activity of the day followed by group acupuncture. They ask deeper

questions, are interested in specific forms and stances, and report fewer incidents of anxiety and insomnia. They help newcomers understand the form better by setting a good example and create a welcoming atmosphere.

It is the highlight of my morning when I stand in front of a (mostly, heavily tattooed) crowd and introduce them to a new way of making their energy flow. For each of them, that energy flows in accordance to a law of the universe as they accept it through the wisdom of Qigong. At the end of each class, I am overwhelmed with all the collective energy. I gently release it to the Earth and bow to each of them, looking into their eyes and connecting with their spirits. It is truly an honor.

Editor's Note: Dr. Sarkisyan's work at the center is ongoing; in fact, she reports that since she started teaching it a year and a half ago, the number of qigong groups (both men and women) in recovery has increased and they are experiencing long-term positive effects.

### *References*

1. Smyth BP, Barry J, Keenan E, Ducray K. "Lapse and relapse following inpatient treatment of opiate dependence." *Irish Medical Journal*, 2010 Jun;103(6):176-9.
2. Moos RH, Moos BS. "Rates and predictors of relapse after natural and treated remission from alcohol use disorders." *Addiction*, 2006 Feb; 101(2): 212-222.

### *Resources*

1. [Caron Foundation](#)
2. [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#)

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