



THE NEW NORMAL

Practicing in the Age of COVID-19

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What will life look like "after" COVID-19 ... or at least after social restrictions have been completely lifted and we have established whatever the "new normal" is? As I write this article in late May, it's already starting to happen in some places, but by the time you read this, who knows?

Of course, none of us knows what the future holds, but I do know one thing: We have a tremendous opportunity to advance traditional medicine / acupuncture at the individual practice and professional level right now. Here are some suggestions along those lines.

Contact Is Critical

Staying in touch with your patients is always important, but right now, it's absolutely essential. You must maintain contact with existing patients and do your best to gain new ones. Whether this is by phone, text, email or Zoom-type platforms, let them know your status. Has your practice been open the entire time? If not, are you open now, and if so, are there any restrictions? If you are still not open, when do you plan to open?



This isn't just an opportunity to connect with patients about your practice. It's also a great chance to connect with them about life - your life and theirs - in what has been an uncertain time. Doing so will build trust and loyalty like nothing else.

The bottom line: Share a message of hope that will resonate. Hope that life is returning to normal. Hope that the months of stress, anxiety, poor sleep habits, etc., can be overcome. Hope that the medicine you provide can help with all that and more, including boosting *immune strength* (undoubtedly a buzzword for years to come).

Grow A Referral Base

Reach out to medical doctors in your community to let them know you are practicing and can help patients. The public is increasingly interested in acupuncture, but they still have questions for their doctors: Does it hurt? Do you think it will help? Do you know an acupuncturist you trust?

For months, many MDs have been operating at partial capacity, only handling emergency cases. That means many of the conditions you also manage - particularly *pain* - have gone unaddressed. Some health care providers have even downsized or are out of business altogether due to the pandemic. The patients are out there; you just have to connect with them.

By building a strong referral base, you will not only add patients to your practice, but also increase public perception of the value acupuncture brings, now and in the future.

Telehealth Is Here to Stay

If you haven't already done so during the COVID-19 crisis, it may be time to give telehealth a try, even if you're back in your clinic. Do you have the ability to conduct a [telehealth visit](#) with the current technology in your office or home?

You must be sure you are practicing legally. You must be licensed in the state where the patient you are working with lives. In order to provide acupuncture care, you need to establish an acupuncturist /patient relationship; this means telehealth probably better with your existing patients.

Patient confidentiality is a prime concern, so you need to make sure any type of technology has a secure connection that can't be compromised.

Clinic Safety Is More Important Than Ever

In the wake of COVID-19, cleanliness is first and foremost. Deep clean the clinic; visit the EPA website for the list of products to use for cleaning and disinfecting all clinic surfaces. These include tables, your clean field area, calendars, credit-card machine, telephone, computer, bathroom, front desk, chairs and everything else you can think of.

You also will want to establish clear procedures and protocols that patients and staff understand. Put up signs, send email updates and post guidelines on your website. Make it clear what you are doing to protect patient safety and what will be required of patients before, during and after every visit.

Make Your Presence Known

Currently, if you are an acupuncturist who wants to treat under the new [CMS guidelines](#) for low back pain, you must be working with an MD. The MD must supervise and bill for your services. Why is MD supervision required? Because acupuncturists are not approved primary providers in the Social Security Act (yet). In order to get acupuncturists included, it will take a bill from Congress.

This November is a nationwide election. Our profession needs to have friends in state legislatures and in the U.S. Congress if we are going to get our bill passed and become an accepted payee in Medicare. That means we all need to get involved and make our presence known.

Tell Your Story

This may be the most important suggestion of all. According to billionaire entrepreneur Richard Branson, storytelling can be used to help drive change. What change is *our* profession trying to drive? Greater acceptance of our medicine. Greater numbers of people benefiting from what we offer. Greater opportunities to become involved in mainstream health care.

There's no better time than now to tell *your* story. What's your story? Right now, it may be the story of how you've survived the COVID-19 pandemic. It may be the story of how acupuncture / TCM can benefit the immune system and limit one's risk of complications from this and other health challenges. It may be the story of all the other ways our medicine can help the world.

Tell your story of hope and health. The stories you share will help shape relationships with patients, potential patients, your community and other health care professionals. And those relationships will carry your practice - and our profession - into the future.

