

SHULAN CLINIC – ACUPUNCTURE • CHINESE HERBAL MEDICINE

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Stress & TCM – by Prof. Shulan Tang

What is stress?

The term stress is used to describe the effect of any event or experience which interferes with one's physical or mental well being. Different individuals will experience varying forms of stress and symptoms relating to stress. These symptoms may include emotional upset, short temper, restlessness, headaches, insomnia, irritable bowels, skin rashes or lack of energy. One person may experience two or more of these symptoms, which may well result in difficulties in everyday life; in one's normal routine, work and home life. People may find it increasingly difficult to cope with their lives as a result.

What causes stress?

It is easy to see that an activity or circumstance which arouses your emotions or which you perceive as threatening or dangerous can be stressful, but what upsets one person may not upset another. Traumatic life events which have a high stress rating for almost everyone include moving house, getting married, divorce, having a baby, the death of a close friend or relative, losing a job or starting a new one. However, for some people even seemingly small irritations such as getting stuck in a queue or caught on a train which is delayed can be major stress events.

What effect does stress have on the body?

In terms of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), stress is linked with the function of the liver and kidney. One of the main physiological functions of the liver is to regulate mind and mood.

TCM believes that the mental activities of human beings are controlled both by the heart and the liver, which smoothes and regulates the flow of vital energy and blood. When the function of the liver is normal, the human body will co-ordinate mental activities effectively, which is indicated by feelings of happiness and sensitivity, being at ease, and being able to reason.

However, when stress affects the liver it is unable to perform this function well, and the human body will fail to co-ordinate its mental and emotional activities. This may be evident by dullness and anxiety, depression, belching, sighing, distension and stuffy sensation in the breast and hypochondria. When the liver's normal function is impaired to the extreme, symptoms may occur such as restlessness of the mind, irascibility, dizziness and sensations of distension in the head, headache, insomnia and dream disturbed sleep.

TCM also believes that another main function of kidney is to store the essence of life. If a person is over worked or sexually overactive, this will drain the essence of kidney and result in backache, dizziness, tiredness or tinnitus (kidney having its specific opening in the ears).

Stress is not terribly harmful in the short term, but prolonged stress keeps your body in overdrive and can affect your health. It may, for example, stimulate the production of excess acid in the stomach which can lead to gastric ulcers, or it may narrow blood vessels causing raised blood pressure, even angina or a heart attack. It may also provoke over or under eating, resulting in obesity or severe loss of weight.

Prolonged (chronic) stress may also be involved in the onset or progression of a number of illnesses. These include migraine, hair loss, asthma, nervous habits, skin rashes, impotence, menstrual problems, colitis, irritable bowel syndrome, low back pain, heart disease, rheumatoid arthritis, and even cancer.

Management of stress by TCM

TCM treats stress conditions mainly by acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine.

1. Firstly, the practitioner will listen to the patient carefully and then advise them as to the best way to deal with the patient's own cause of stress.
2. Next the practitioner will ask more questions about the patient's health and history, check the pulse and the tongue
3. Acupuncture is one method of treatment which can unblock the energy of the body, regulate the liver and its function and help the body relax. This is usually undertaken once a week for three to five weeks, gradually falling to once every one or
4. Chinese herbal treatment can be taken in the long term as a preventative.

Common formulas are:

- (a) Xia Yao Wan (Easy Wanderer Pills) to disperse the liver energy and soothe emotional anger and depression.
- (b) Qi Du Di Huang Wan (Bolus of Rehmannia and Wolf berry fruit Pills) to nourish the kidney and calm the liver yang. This is more suitable for tiredness and dizziness.
- (c) A specially formulated herbal teabag is available from ShuLan UK Ltd. This is for severe stress with such symptoms as restlessness, becoming upset easily, skin rashes, headaches, constipation, and general feelings of excess heat and thirst, accompanied by a red tongue with little or no coating and a rapid pulse.

A good example of stress management is a lady of 35 years old who had suffered from stress for over 10 years before contacting myself. She was a professional, working long hours in a high pressure job. When she first came to see me, she was very stressed and had tears in her eyes as she explained how listless she felt, and how she argued with her husband regularly. She felt hot, thirsty, and had dry skin and hair. These symptoms grew worse before her period. I gave her acupuncture and prescribed one week of stress tea bags.

In the second week she came back with improved skin and hair condition. She felt much more able to cope with family and work and had more energy. She had another treatment and now has acupuncture once a month, and now takes tea bags regularly. She was amazed at the difference "Whats the tonic in it? " she asked "Its a lot better than Ginseng"

In reality, the treatment of stress does not require Ginseng. The most important thing is to balance the energy of the body. Ginseng is too hot for the body and the tea bag instead clears away the liver fire and nourishes the essence the kidney.

In addition to the above treatment, TCM also recommends that patients stick to a good diet and increase relaxation exercises such as Tai Chi.

Many people turn to alcohol to help them relax. However this neither removes the cause of the stress nor helps with long term coping. In fact alcohol will result in raised liver Yang (fire) which will make the symptoms worse.

If you are unable to cope with stress try to talk to a TCM practitioner. He or she can help you to manage it in a healthy and natural way.