

How Emotions Affect Your Health- A Chinese Medicine Approach

By Christina Crawford, LAc, Dipl. OM

Have you ever fallen ill after a stressful time in your life? This article will explain how emotional health impacts your physical health. Sometimes people are told that their symptoms are “all in their head”. In Chinese medicine, physical health is not disconnected from emotional health; it is an inherent aspect of the medicine. For those of you with hypertension, you may be aware that relaxation is central in the management of high blood pressure. This is just one example of how emotional health is connected to physical health.

The ‘shen’ in Chinese medicine is the ‘spirit or mind’. In Chinese medicine, it is said that when a person has a serious disease, but their shen is healthy and vibrant, they have a better chance of recovery. On the other side of the coin, with a less severe disease, if the person’s shen is dull and weak, their prognosis is poor. This demonstrates how important emotional health is to our overall well-being. In fact, one of the most important aspects of Chinese medicine is the relationship between the body and the spirit.

The organs in bio-medicine are generally restricted to their mechanical functions. For example, the kidneys filter and excrete urine, the heart pumps blood, the lungs process oxygen, etc. In Chinese medicine, each organ has both a mechanical function and an emotional function. Certain emotions have a specific corresponding organ that can be pathologically affected. Emotion in of itself does not create disease, but emotion out of balance is damaging. For example, fear can protect us from doing something dangerous and thus a “negative” emotion is helpful. Even the less desirable emotions are not inherently bad. When an emotion has become overactive or underactive, the body will physically manifest this imbalance.

Anger and the Liver

A common diagnosis in Chinese medicine is ‘liver qi stagnation’. The liver is associated with anger, frustration, feeling stuck, stress and regret. Triggers include; a traffic jam, an unfulfilling job, or wishing that you had made a different life choice. Liver qi stagnation can manifest in the body in many ways, including: anger or emotional outbursts, anxiety, neck pain, cold hands and feet, headaches, tinnitus, fibroids, muscular tension, dizziness, pain that comes and goes or moves around the body, particularly rib-side pain. Acupuncture, herbal medicine, and qi gong are very good at restoring balance to relieve symptoms. Often, life changes need to be made, especially if it is causing disease.

In health, the liver can move orderly and freely. Growth, change and activity inspire this emotional aspect of ourselves. Humans are not intended to be static beings. We change, we grow, we have the potential to live life in a way that we love. People who are prone to liver qi stagnation do well with a regular exercise routine. Physical movement allows your body to break free of constraint and facilitates the flow of blood, which is great for stress relieve.

Fear and the Kidneys

Fear prevents people from getting too close to a rattlesnake. It is a physiological survival mechanism which triggers the release of hormones to help us escape if necessary, such as adrenaline. In Chinese medicine fear is associated with the kidneys (think adrenals). For some, urination increases right before an anticipated stressful event; this is fear impacting the kidneys. Long term fear, such as an abusive relationship, can damage the kidneys as well. It is common in practice to see patients with insomnia, incontinence, kidney stones or other renal diseases who have a history of either chronic fear or a very traumatic experience such as an accident or witnessing something horrific. In health, the kidneys can distinguish between things worthy of fear and those that do not require lifesaving protection, such as social anxiety or phobias. As you may have heard, there are two types of fear; the one that keeps you

alive, and the one that keeps you from living. Acupuncture and Chinese medicine understand this connection and has a concrete approach to addressing pathological fear.

Grief and the Lungs

Crying is a common response to loss or regret. Perhaps a person will feel weight on their chest, breathlessness, depression or fatigue. Grief, in Chinese medicine is related to the lung and is essential in times of loss. Perhaps you have experienced the strong need to cry, but won't allow this emotion to come out, so you hold it in. Swallowing the need to cry is almost immediately physically uncomfortable. Often, acupuncturists see patients with lung cancer, pneumonia, asthma or other lung related illnesses in those who have suffered great loss, deep regret, or have not had the opportunity to properly grieve.

Acupuncture can be very helpful to calm the spirit, which is not equivalent to stopping the tears. For many, grief stems from events that occurred long ago. Chinese medicine can open the door which will allow you to process, forgive and release these events so that they do not create future health problems.

Joy and the Heart

For some, it is challenging to imagine that joy can be an emotion associated with disease, and most of the time joy is healthy. Joy is the emotion of the heart and it is only problematic when it becomes excessive excitement or craving. This over stimulation can cause palpitations, insomnia, or restlessness. The heart is known as the Emperor per Chinese medicine, and thus keeping the heart healthy is an integral aspect of the medicine.

Worry and the Spleen/Stomach

Have you ever experienced an upset stomach when you are worried about something? Worry and pensiveness in Chinese medicine are related to the digestive system, or 'spleen/stomach'. Diseases associated with the digestive system are very common in our society. There are a multitude of symptoms that can arise depending upon which factors, emotions and organs are involved. We are complex creatures. Over thinking and excessive worry may contribute to difficulty sleeping, abdominal pain, bloating, fatigue, lack of concentration, poor appetite and sighing. It is important to practice relaxation techniques and to eat warm and nourishing meals at regular times in a calm environment. Your acupuncturist will work with you to determine if your digestive complaints are dietary, emotional, constitutional, or a combination of factors.

A Path for Emotional Health

In addition to regular acupuncture treatments, there are several things you can do to restore internal balance. Each organ has an associated exercise in qi gong which supports its function. qi gong is an ancient system of movement for creating health in the body. Herbal medicine is very helpful for balancing the spirit and addressing the root cause of the disharmony. Chinese medicine recognizes that pain and illness are not "all in your head". Each part of the whole contributes to your wellbeing; physical, mental and emotional. When you are ready change the things in your life that are causing imbalance, acupuncture and Chinese medicine can help you on your path to wellness.

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