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Coping with Stress with Chinese Medicine

by Frederic Thouvenin

There was always one question that was asked at my school's clinic during the patient's interview by the practitioner in charge and his following students. This question was: "Do you have stress in your life?" And I always remember the look on the patient's face expressing his/her surprise. Most of the time, the answers would be with a little giggle: "Yes, life is stressful. No?" "Don't you have stress?" I guess that question was never asked correctly and no one was interested in developing the question further. Our reactions were always very predictable "This person suffers from Liver Qi stagnation" or "Xiao Yao San is your formula of choice". Stress can express itself in so many different ways and it is really important to listen to how stress is expressed in our client's life.

It is well established by contemporary medicine that stress can be the cause of a wide range of diseases. However, stress is an important part of how our body responds to external stimuli with the activation of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. In itself stress is a good thing, but chronic stress stimulation of the autonomic nervous system has a very bad effect on bodily functions. Therefore, diagnosing a client's chief complaint on the only basis of stress will not be sufficient. We need to further explore and discern the cause of the stress. Stress is a rather broad concept and

healing and management can be tricky.

Chinese medicine's strength dwells in the holistic approach to the treatment of dis-ease in a person and is rooted in the body-mind-spirit connection. We have to investigate and differentiate the patterns exhibited by the person and try to keep in mind the big picture. Many times, the client's case might be quite complex, but by sticking to the basics of Chinese medicine, a categorization of the symptoms exhibited into patterns will emerge and with it the appropriate treatment plan. As our teachers would say: "Treat the root and not the branch", or "Stop looking/searching for information, slow down and observe". Of course, further investigation of how stress translate in the client's mind and body by asking ample questions will give very valuable information and help us direct our intention better by choosing the appropriate acupuncture point or the appropriate herb for the design of a formula.

In my own practice, the patterns I have so far encountered were mostly patterns of blood deficiencies, Qi deficiency, yin deficiencies with heat, yang deficiency, and some excess heat. Very often, I have seen clients with tendencies to worry too much, others suffered from depression, or those who pushed themselves to the limit without being aware of it. In

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- Bi Xie Fen Qing Wan
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- Ding Chuan Wan
- Gan Mao Ling Jie Du Wan
- Guan Jie Yan Wan
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- Ping Wei Wan
- Qing Fei Yi Huo Wan



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those cases, I have had good responses with herbal formulations such as Suan Zao Ren Tang, Si Wu Tang, Ba Zhen Tang, Zhi Bai Di Huang Wan and Tian Wang Bu Xin Dan. I remember this person who came to me with complaints of intense stress, anxiety, depression and dread of sunlight and summertime. Only a few other elements of information allowed me to make a decision on the pattern exhibited and the treatment plan to follow. I sent this client home with Tian Wang Bu Xin Dan. I saw this person again several weeks later with a big smile on her face. She was finally able to enjoy and have some peace in her life. Others responded well with such formula as Chai Hu Jia Long Gu Mu Li Tang, a Shang Han Lun formula.

Another aspect to take into consideration is people's diet. Our modern diet is so rich in carbohydrates and stimulants that it impacts greatly our bodily functions creating such conditions as inflammation and adrenal depletion. In Chinese medicine, we know that sweets can damage our spleen and kidney systems and therefore create imbalances. And again the strength of Chinese medicine is the importance that body and mind are part of the same whole. One has an effect on the other and vice versa. If our Spleen system is put out of balance by bad dietary habits, our emotions are going to be disturbed and worry and stress issues will occur. Diet is now a big part of "functional medicine", a new branch of modern medicine that emphasizes preventative care. I often include dietary recommendations for my clients depending on their constitution and condition.

However, it is important to emphasize that supplementation with herbal formulas and a dietary change might not bring panacea. It will help patients reach a plateau in the management of stress, but might not eliminate completely those overwhelming feelings. This is when such concepts as mindfulness ("being in the Now") are of primal importance. The rest of the path to better stress management needs to go through a re-learning or re-programming process of one's nervous system and thought process, as well as a growing awareness of one's emotional and psychological states. To help in this re-programming process of the mind, meditation and psychotherapy can be very useful tools to overcome debilitating crises. I also recommend the practice of such activities as Yoga or Tai Chi Chuan on a regular basis. Those practices help in relaxing the body and mind. All of those modalities help in increasing our thought process awareness and in return help in a better control of those thoughts. By controlling our mind, we can reduce the effect of stress in our life and in our body enabling better bodily functions and better enjoyment of life.

In conclusion, stress is complicated to treat so using several modalities in conjunction can be quite beneficial.

Frederic Thouvenin is a certified licensed acupuncturist who has Masters of Science in Traditional Chinese Medicine and Physics as it applies to Western Medicine. His interest in Chinese medicine stemmed from his early education in Chinese Internal Martial Arts. As the lead herbalist and consultant at the sorely missed Elephant Pharmacy in Berkeley, Mr. Thouvenin showed his commitment to serving his community and sharing his knowledge of TCM.

Q&A



TCM Journeys: Volker Scheid

Dr. Volker Scheid practices acupuncture and herbal medicine at The Traditional Acupuncture Centre in Waterloo (London). He has over twenty-five years of experience in East Asian medicine and currently focuses on internal medicine and gynecology. In 2006 he was awarded a visiting professorship at the Zhejiang University of Chinese Medicine in Hangzhou (China). Dr. Scheid is the author of three books on Chinese Medicine and traditions.



Why did you become involved with Traditional Chinese Medicine?

I grew up in a family engaged in the cultivation of medicinal herbs so herbal medicine has been part of my life from the word go. During my school holidays I would help my father, doing everything from weeding to harvesting, drying and processing herbs. These were western herbs, of course, and so after graduating from school I studied western herbal medicine. The only course I could find at the time was a part-time course, so I decided to do an acupuncture part-time course at the same time. This got me involved with Chinese medicine and I soon discovered that the Chinese tradition was far more sophisticated and effective. So I started studying and have never stopped since.

What is in your cupboard/medicine cabinet?

Cool the Diaphragm Powder (liáng gé sǎn), Augmented Cyperus and Perilla Leaf Powder (jiǎ wèi xiāng sū sǎn), Sojao Semen preparatum (dàn dòu chí), Preserve Harmony Pill (bào hé wán), Kudzu Decoction (gé gēn tāng), Aspirin and Melatonin.

What is your favorite place?

Somewhere warm, relaxed, ideally by the sea, where you can get good coffee and good food. Crete, the Carribean,

Tulupan, Berkeley, Ubud, Broome are some places that come to mind.

What are your thoughts on the future of Traditional Chinese Medicine?

Whatever has been around for 2000 years and has diffused throughout the world would seem to be hardy and enduring and able to adjust to a variety of different scenarios of what the future may be like. However, I also think that the globalization and commodification of Chinese medicine, and the need for standardization and uniformity these

processes imply, may prove to be tremendously destabilizing for the future of Chinese medicine, which is a tradition that has thrived on diversity and difference. At the same time, of course, globalization brings with it its own engendering of diversity as Chinese medicine will have to adapt to different local contexts of practice. Globalisation also has the potential to counteract the nationalisms that have infected traditional medicine in East Asia, which I see as constraining and inhibiting in the same way that the West is constrained by enduring attachments to Orientalist and (neo)imperialist attitudes and orientations. I also see profound shifts in biomedicine taking place that are moving modern medicine towards an engagement with process, singularity and complexity. These may, in turn, initiate new alignments between Asian and western medical traditions that are quite different from what goes under the name "integrated medicine" at present. In the end, however, we as individuals have little influence on history as a process. "Think globally act locally" thus seems to me to be one of the best maxims to follow. As physicians that means to take care of our patients in the best way we can, and to pass on what little we know to the next generation.

More information about Dr. Scheid can be found on his website <http://www.volkerscheid.co.uk/index.php>.

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