

Treating Depression with Traditional Chinese Medicine

Unhappiness is a common emotion that is part everyday life and a natural response to sad events. However when it becomes severe or chronic it is called depression. Untreated, it can interfere with daily life and damage self-esteem. Unfortunately, depression is becoming a greater and greater concern for many people. Between 1997 and 2002 the use of antidepressants in Canada increased by 40%, with more young adults and seniors being diagnosed with depression.¹ Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM for short) is a treatment option that can help many people overcome this common ailment.



How TCM can help

According to TCM, health is a harmonious balance of mind and body with their surroundings. In contrast, illness is an imbalance. According to TCM's understanding of health and illness, our emotions play an important role in keeping our lives in balance.

Depression in Chinese Medicine is seen as an imbalance of the body's Qi and Blood. The free flow of Qi throughout the body allows us to respond to physical and mental stresses and to stay healthy, while Blood nourishes the body and mind. Imbalances in Qi and Blood due to emotional stress, childbirth, chronic illnesses or other factors can result in depression. TCM treatment aims to restore the balance between Qi and Blood, mind and body. These treatments can include acupuncture, Chinese herbs, massage, lifestyle counselling and frequently a combination of these.



What to expect

At your first visit to a TCM practitioner, you'll be asked about the history of your condition as well as more general questions, such as questions about your appetite or energy levels. Your answers will help your practitioner gain a complete picture of your current state of health. Your practitioner will also examine your tongue and complexion and take your pulse to refine their analysis.



Getting results

Over 3000 years old, TCM has accumulated a vast history of clinical experience for a wide variety of conditions. Several modern studies have shown that TCM can be effective in helping people deal with depression.

One placebo-controlled study involved 58 people diagnosed with depression. After treatment with Chinese herbs, 91% were either relieved of their symptoms or showing measurable improvements. These results were significantly better than the control group.²

A controlled study that compared acupuncture treatment with the antidepressant amitriptyline found that acupuncture was just as effective as the pharmaceutical medication.³

Another series of studies comparing acupuncture to amitriptyline, including a randomized, multicentre study involving 241 people, also found acupuncture to be as effective as the antidepressant medication and resulted in fewer side-effects.⁴



Preventing Depression

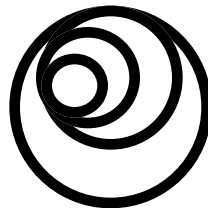
TCM has a long history of emphasising prevention and health maintenance. A healthy diet is central to maintaining mental and physical health. Additionally, exercise and stress reduction techniques can be very helpful in preventing depression. A 2002 review study of alternative treatments for depression found that exercise and relaxation techniques can be an effective addition to conventional treatments.⁵ The Chinese traditions of Qi Gong and Tai Chi help circulate Qi and Blood, balance the mind and the body, and effectively combine exercise with stress reduction. Your TCM practitioner can help recommend lifestyle changes to help you avoid episodes of depression.

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1. Sokoloff, H. "Use of antidepressants up 40% in 'very anxious nation,' report shows." National Post. November 2, 2002. pg. A1.
 2. Zhang, Meizeng, et al. Clinical study of depression treated with Xiao Yao San. J Shandong TCM Univ 1998; 1:34.
 3. Larzelere, Michele, et al. Anxiety, depression and insomnia. Prim Care Clin Office Pract 2002; 29: 339-360.
 4. Yang, Xuijuan, et al. Clinical observation of depression treated with acupuncture on extra channel points. J TCM 1992; 3:36.
 5. Manber, Rachel, et al. Alternative treatments for depression: empirical support and relevance to women. J Clin Psychiatry 2002; 63: 628-640.
- I am indebted to Dr. Kai Chen M.M., Ph.D. (Beijing) for summarizing the Chinese research used in this factsheet.

Disclaimer

This factsheet is not intended to treat, diagnose or prescribe. The information provided is not to be considered a substitute for consultation with a qualified health care practitioner.

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