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Understanding Depression from a Traditional Chinese Medicine Perspective

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Depression is characterized by overwhelming sadness and hopelessness. It is responsible for a substantial proportion of the global disease burden and accounts for 35-40% of all psychiatric illnesses. It is estimated to affect more than 350 million people worldwide. (1, 2) According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, 8% of Canadians will experience a major depressive episode in their life. (3) For people who are clinically depressed, almost every aspect of their life can be affected, including their emotions, physical health, relationships and work. (3) Feelings of severe sadness, anxiety, hopelessness, and worthlessness can last for months and years (2). 'It does not feel like there is a "light at the end of the tunnel" — there is just a long, dark tunnel.' (3) Depression is also twice as common in women as in men. (1)

The main signs of depression include, but are not limited to:

- sadness, hopelessness
- painful thoughts
- anxiety and agitation
- loss of interest
- loss of self esteem
- hypochondriasis
(health phobia or health anxiety)
- distorted perception
- insomnia
- loss of appetite
- diurnal rhythm (feeling worse in the morning)



Depression According to Traditional Chinese Medicine

According to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) philosophy, depression can be viewed in several ways.

Stagnation

Firstly, the Chinese term for depression is Yu which literally means 'STAGNATION'. This is intentional. Stagnation makes things accumulate. Stagnation disables movement; stagnation disables transformation. Stagnation can thus lead to disease (1).

Imagine a river flowing freely. Fresh water filled with plant and animal life, constantly rejuvenating and moving. Now imagine that same river stagnant. Whether due to a deficiency at the source or a blockage somewhere along its path, that stagnation quickly leads to accumulation of debris and prevents new life from thriving and surviving. Stagnation can be seen as the underlying cause or a major contributing factor to depression.

The Mind and the Ethereal Soul

In TCM, heavy weight is given to the relationship between the Mind (Shen) and

what is called the Ethereal Soul. The Ethereal Soul is the psychic energy that gives the Mind inspiration, creativity, ideas, plans, life dreams, and aspirations. The Ethereal Soul is dynamic and is constantly coming and going; constantly searching, inventing, full of ideas and aims - a direct psychic manifestation of the free flow of Qi in our body. The Mind however, is in charge of controlling and integrating the fluid ideas and numerous directions of the Ethereal Soul into the general psyche. It is said that the Ethereal Soul is the source of many ideas simultaneously while the Mind can deal with only one at a time (1)

In severe depression, there is a disconnect between the Mind and the Ethereal Soul or in some cases, an over-controlling of the Mind (often leading to suppression or guilt). The normal movement characteristic of the Ethereal Soul is lacking, and the person lacks imagination, creativity, inspiration, life plans and goals. Depression is the result.

Will-Power of the Kidneys

Another aspect of looking at depression involves the Will-Power of the Kidneys. From the perspective of TCM, the organs

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are seen with a different lens, having varied functions and roles, including a strong emotional component. In Chinese, Zhi translates to Will-Power. Zhi of the Kidneys as it relates to depression refers to will-power itself, drive, determination, enthusiasm, and physical and mental power (1). In a depressed patient, "Zhi" or Will-Power" in its broad sense, is lacking and so a patient suffering from major depression will show signs of a Kidney deficiency.

Acupuncture – a Viable Treatment Option

These TCM interpretations are mentioned because for those experiencing states of depression or major depressive disorder acupuncture can certainly be used to harmonize the Mind and the Ethereal Soul, improve the free flow of Qi, and tonify the Kidneys (for improved Zhi or will-power).

Studies have been conducted examining the safety and efficacy of acupuncture. In one British randomized, controlled trial of 755 patients with moderate to severe depression, those patients receiving an average of 10 acupuncture treatments experienced statistically significant improvements at three months and twelve months

compared to regular conventional medical care alone. These favourable outcomes were comparable to those achieved with counselling. Acupuncture was shown to cause no adverse effects.

Many patients with depression come to see me either already on a plethora of medications or want to avoid going down that road. Given the safety and efficacy of acupuncture and the fact that it can be safely administered without risk of interaction with any drug regime, acupuncture is a viable treatment option for those who want an alternative to or adjunctive therapy to pharmaceutical treatment.

Other Naturopathic Treatments

While my naturopathic practice and this article focus strongly on TCM, as a naturopathic doctor, I know that no two people are the same and most people can benefit from a multi-pronged approach. An acupuncture protocol will be carefully selected after a thorough health history that

- identifies underlying causes (eg. emotional stress, anger, sadness/grief, worry, guilt, overwork)
- takes the patient's constitution into consideration (predisposition to depression/mental health disorders, coping strategies, state of health)
- addresses the irregular, unhealthy or inappropriate diet for that person including nutrient deficiencies
- considers other underlying health conditions that may be contributing to their mental health condition (heavy metal toxicity, food sensitivities, gut problems, etc)

Additional naturopathic treatments options such as herbal therapy, supplement recommendations dietary changes and counselling all provide a patient in need of support with compassionate, safe and natural therapeutic options that ARE effective.

References

1 Maciocia, G. (2008) *The Practice of Chinese Medicine: The Treatment of*

Diseases with Acupuncture and Chinese Herbs, 2nd ed., Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone Elsevier.

2 *Understanding Mental Illness: Depression*. Canadian Mental Health Association [Online] <http://www.cmha.ca/mental-health/understanding-mental-illness/depression/> [28 Oct 2014].

3 MacPherson, H, et al. Sept 2013. 'Acupuncture and Counselling for Depression in Primary Care: A Randomised Controlled Trial' *PLOS Medicine*, vol.10, iss. 9 [Online] <http://www.plos-medicine.org/article/fetchObject.action?uri=info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pmed.1001518&representation=PDF> [29 Oct 2014]

Recipe Corner

AFRICAN BEANS

1 ½ cups	dry, black-eyed beans
2 medium	onions
2 Tbsp.	unrefined oil
1 sm. can	tomato paste
1 can (410g)	coconut cream
2 tsp.	paprika
½ tsp.	chili powder or more to taste
½ tsp.	cumin
1 tsp.	sugar
1 tsp.	salt
	black pepper to taste

- Soak beans overnight. Drain and rinse, to place in a pot and cover with water. Bring to a boil and simmer until beans become tender.
- In another pan, sauté the onions in oil until soft and clear.
- Add the tomato paste, coconut cream, and seasonings, stirring until they form a smooth and creamy sauce.
- When the beans are cooked, drain and combine with the sauce.
- Serve immediately, or for a better flavour, leave to stand and reheat when needed.
- Serve on white or brown rice accompanied with a mixed green salad.

For more information or to make an appointment please call:

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