



REDUCE YOUR STRESS, IMPROVE YOUR MOOD!*

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I recently bought a humorous plaque. In letters surrounded by field flowers, it declares, "Good morning! Let the stress begin!" I laughed out loud—my stress level fell—so I plunked down ten bucks to buy it, which in turn put a smile on the faces of the sellers.

Stress is ubiquitous where we live. We are dunned by excess of all kinds—noise, light, movement, food, unpredictable behavior (think of driving), demands for our time and attention not only from those who actually matter (family, friends, colleagues, clients) but constantly from advertisers in print, on the radio, TV and internet.

Overload time! It is hardly surprising that most people say they feel stressed... exhausted... and often anxious, panicky, depressed, unable to sleep, and physically ill as well.

Can Asian medicine help? Indeed, yes! Acupuncture care is remarkably effective at reducing the sensation of *dis*-stress and returning the body to physiological balance, formally known as homeostasis. Herbs, moving meditation, diet, techniques of self-care—in its long history, Asian medicine has developed numerous ways to improve mood.

More in a moment, but first, let's take time out to define 'stress' and its links to illness.

What is "Stress?"

Hans Selye is the scientist who first defined the physiological components of the stress response in his book *The Stress of Life* (1956). He called it the "general adaptation syndrome" and identified three phases. In the first, the body reacts to a stressor with alarm, and either tries to escape or tries to fight—this is called the 'fight or flight' response, and it represents a state of excitement in the body. If the person deals successfully with the alarm, the body returns to its normal calm physiological state, and all is well. But if the stressor continues acting on this person, the body moves into a second phase, called 'resistance.' Eventually, the third phase sets in, called 'exhaustion.'



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The reason so many of us *feel* 'stressed' is because we are unable to return from Stage 1 to a calm physiological state. Instead, we spend large parts of our lives 'on alert,' trying to 'make do' in the presence of constant stressors, and that is very fatiguing.

What are the symptoms of Dis-Stress?

Stress, Selye said, is the "non-specific response of the body to any demand." The most important word here is '*non-specific*.' Some stressors are rather good for us—hunger, for example, sends us to eat. Exercise increases energy. Loneliness makes us seek companionship. But even a commonplace stressor can become a problem if you cannot resolve it, or if it carries an emotional burden that you cannot release. Hunger is easily assuaged. But if you fear weight gain, or follow dietary rules that limit your access to food, then hunger can get wound up in complexities that make eating *dis*-stressful.

So--if someone or something makes demands on you, it's a stressor. If it's irritating, and *goes on* irritating you, especially if you *feel there's not much you can do about it*, then you are likely to develop signs of negative stress, or dis-stress. **Anxiety** is one such symptom, a symptom of being stuck in the second stage of resistance, unable to resolve the problem. Anxiety shows up as worrying about things, as a too rapid heartbeat, as shakiness, insomnia, irritability...plus there are many physical complaints that often have a large anxiety component such as headaches, chronic digestive woes, back pain, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia. **Panic attacks** are extreme manifestations of anxiety.

When 'exhaustion' sets in we see more serious complaints—**depression** is one we will focus on, but conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, pancreatitis, gallbladder disease, cirrhosis of the liver and many others also indicate that the body is reaching the limit of its ability to adapt.

How Can You Use Asian Medicine to Help?

The special genius of Asian medicine is that it *aims to return the body to a calm physiological state*. It does not try to counter hundreds of different diseases as biomedicine does. Instead, by taking *a view of the body as one dynamic whole*, it uses acupuncture, herbs, diet, and movement to even out nutrient, blood and energy



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flow. When these are flowing smoothly throughout the body, symptoms and illnesses disappear because the body feels comfortable, at ease, without stress. Around 300 BC Lao Tzu put it this way (Wytter Bynner translation): *Those who flow as life flows, feel no wear, feel no tear, need no mending, no repair.*

Of course, not every condition can be fully repaired! If long-continued stress has resulted in permanent damage to tissues, Asian medicine can help by reducing the effects of damage, but it may not be able to reverse damage.

ACUPUNCTURE: This medical process involves inserting very fine needles at points selected to address the complaint. For example, there are points known to induce calm in an agitated patient. But what I want to emphasize is that acupuncture care *nearly always makes people feel relaxed, with an improved sense of well-being.* Why?—again, because a body in balance feels good, so doesn't complain! To receive acupuncture care you must see a specialist, but once you've found a good one, ask to be taught some **acupressure self-care techniques** to help maintain your improved mood.

About those needles: Some people object that sticking needles in people just couldn't feel good! But the little needles rarely hurt. In fact, many of my patients fall asleep on the treatment table. They are grateful to have those moments of peace and relaxation in their demanding day. They leave feeling better, with an improved ability to deal with the stress of life.

HERBS: Over 3 millenia the Chinese have developed many herbal combinations that are effective for people suffering from mood and other complaints. Your practitioner will carefully distinguish among your symptoms to choose the remedy most likely to help. For example, you'd use a different remedy if daytime anxiety was your primary complaint, or if daytime anxiety was accompanied by nightmares.

MOVING MEDITATION: This phrase indicates that you move—exercise—in ways that foster calm and a sense of being centered and grounded. **Tai chi and chi gong** are forms of moving meditation, as is **yoga**. If you are suffering from a recurrent mood issue, you'd do well to take up moving meditation! These practices strengthen the muscles and bones and improve your sense of physical balance, while their slow and repetitive moves balances your entire physiology, thus helping to repair stress.

DIET: Believe it or not, certain foods promote mood disorders, while others relieve them! Wouldn't you like to know more? It's a big subject and I can't do it justice here. Just know that **the human body prefers warm cooked natural foods** to raw,



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cold, greasy, spicy, sugary, stimulating or artificial foods. By feeding yourself a cooked diet featuring lots of whole grains like rice, lots of vegetables, and limited amounts of other foods, you can influence your mood for the better.

Experimental Data on Treating Depression with Acupuncture

Depression comes in many forms. Research funded by NIH and carried out by Rosa Schnyer, acupuncturist, and John Allen, psychologist, sought to measure how effective acupuncture was in treating uncomplicated depression. They found that depression is sometimes associated with excess, and sometimes with deficiency. Excess looks like irritability, anger, restlessness, insomnia, gnawing hunger, an inability to calm and relax. In contrast, deficiency may show up with sleepiness, tears, inability to concentrate or work, little appetite, a pervading sense of sorrow.

In their study, participants (all women) were assigned to one of three study groups, all of which eventually received 12 active (not placebo) sessions of acupuncture care over 8 weeks. Using DSM-IV remission criteria, 64% of the women achieved full remission of symptoms, 18% partial remission, and 18% no remission. Using the Hamilton Rating Scale, 70% experienced remission. This level is about the same as the levels achieved by psychotherapy and by psychopharmacology. The authors of this landmark study conclude that **"acupuncture is as effective as pharmacotherapy or psychotherapy as a treatment for depression."** For more on this study consult the popular text *Curing Depression Naturally with Chinese Medicine*, by Rosa Schnyer and Bob Flaws (Blue Poppy Press 1998), or the technical report *Acupuncture in the Treatment of Depression, A Manual for Practice and Research*, by Rosa Schnyer, John Allen, et al (Churchill-Livingstone, 2001). The popular text has suggestions you can promptly put into practice in your own life.

My Experience

Few patients arrive in my office with 'just' physical complaints. Given a chance to talk, even people with sore knees, reflux, sinusitis, or menstrual pain, will add that they feel stressed, frustrated, irritable, have trouble sleeping, or find it difficult to deal with...a whole raft of contingencies. Clearly, I must tend both their sore physical places and their sore emotional places! And this is the norm in Asian medicine, because it is an holistic practice.



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I think of a woman (but there are many women like this!) who says she is sooo tired, and can I help? She has many anxieties about her job. Her grown daughter is making poor decisions. She'd like to retire, but...what about finances, friends, and where to live? No wonder she's tired—she lacks peace of mind; she is distressed! In my clinic she takes off her shoes and socks, and lies down on the treatment table. I take her pulses, press reflex points, choose acupoints to help. First I use points to move Qi and Blood. This reduces her sense of stuckness, her sense of "what shall I do?" After a few minutes I add needles to tonify—to strengthen Qi and Blood. I keep checking the pulses, feeling if they are coming into balance. On the table, my patient starts to change. She is no longer complaining. Suddenly she is telling a joke on herself. She begins to have ideas...ideas of how she might be able to ease her problems. Creativity is a sign of improved physiological balance; so is laughter! Her pulses are now in balance. I take out the needles. She gets up and stretches. "I don't know what you did, but boy, I sure feel better!" I encourage her to take the "Elixir" I've given her to remedy her deficiency. And I remind her to notice how long the treatment lasts—will she 'hold' it for 3-4 days? Sleep better? Find some energy? She returns in a week, and we repeat the process. Over time she can 'hold' the treatment longer, and she begins to make changes in her diet, seeks more exercise, finds she can allow her daughter her own life decisions. Bit by bit her anxiety is disappearing, and she feels a rewarding sense of returning energy.

I think of an overweight man who complains of high blood pressure, irritable bowel syndrome, and an enlarged prostate. He says his workplace is unpredictable, that his boss demands that each worker make their own hotel reservations, which may or may not be reimbursed...that he commutes 2 hours a day...skips breakfast and mostly eats in restaurants. He finally adds, "I just feel sort of angry, cheated...but there isn't much use in complaining, you know?" This man needs to eat better and lose weight, which will improve other symptoms. But *right now* he needs a release of anger, frustration, and his growing sense of defeat. The needles can do that. I choose points that reduce irritability, that improve decision-making capacity, that calm the intestines and stabilize appetite, that lower blood pressure. Over several sessions we identify steps he can take to lose weight, and he starts a class in tai chi. Gradually he maintains his physiological balance better, and this helps him "go with the flow" more easily at work and at home. His physical symptoms fade with acupuncture, tai chi, and herbs.

Summary



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Mood issues accompany dis-stress. Take care of yourself by learning a moving meditation, by improving your diet, sleeping enough, and by consulting an acupuncturist. And if you like this message, *pass it on!* Help yourself and others by guiding them toward gentle effective Asian medical care.

And ***Take a Moment to Relax*** - try the meditation on this website!