

Looking Forward, Will Acupuncture Be Part of the Solution for Anxiety Disorders?

By Dr. Taya Stanley

Everyone experiences fear and anxiety at times. The physical/emotional mix of anxiety is often a normal and healthy response to our external world. In fact, it has been shown that a certain amount of anxiety increases our productivity and may even be needed. We call this an 'adaptive' trait, because the anxiety is 'helping us' to adapt to the outside world: to prepare for a crisis. However, at certain point we reach our peak and then, if anxiety continues to increase, if levels stay high too long, or if we are continually re-stimulated, we lose the ability to function (be productive) dramatically. What is the difference between anxiety and an anxiety disorder?

With the disorder we are caught 'past the peak'. The anxiety severity, frequency and length of symptoms are disproportional to the outside stimulus: the crisis. With an anxiety disorder the feelings or symptoms of anxiety are so extreme that they become difficult to control. Symptoms can include overwhelming feelings of panic and fear, uncontrollable obsessive thoughts, painful and intrusive memories and recurring nightmares that disrupt one's ability to function in their life. Physical symptoms can include fatigue, restlessness, difficulty concentrating, irritability, muscle tension and disturbed sleep. [1] Anxiety disorders are the most common emotional disorders in the United States. It is said that approximately 13% of the population is affected by anxiety disorders, that represents as many as 25 million Americans. [2]

Even more of us regularly experience 'normal' ranges of anxiety that put us far beyond our peak, leaving us shaken and unable to function at levels in life we would like to.

Two interesting studies conducted by Dr. Shu-Ming Wang, through Yale University School of Medicine, examined the effects of acupuncture on anxiety in hospital settings. The first was published in 2001. It was a blinded, randomized controlled trial with 55 subjects conducted by

Dr. Shu-Ming Wang and Zeev N. Kain. They used hospital staff in operating room situations to find if auricular acupuncture could decrease acute anxiety. In this first study the subjects were broken into three groups. Each group received treatment on one of three different points located on the ear. They were needled at either the point called ShenMen, a sham point, or a 'relaxation point' (located at the superior wall of the triangular fossa). They received treatment bilaterally, using occlusive press needles that were left in place for 48 hours. Interestingly, electrodermal activity, heart rate and blood pressure all remained "relativity constant between the three groups." However, when examined using the STAI scale, the group that received the relaxation point reported being "significantly less anxious" than the other two groups at 20 minutes and 24-hours. Excitingly, this group showed a "profound change in their behavioral anxiety levels."

[3]

In a second study a few years later, Dr Wang continued to explore the topic, this time with mothers of children going into operation. In this study he had a group of 44 mothers receive auricular acupuncture 30 minutes before their children were to go into surgery. Others received treatments on wrists and shoulders. Dr Wang reported that the group receiving acupuncture on ear points "had significantly less anxiety than the 49 mothers who got acupuncture but at the shoulder points, wrists, and joint positions." He also reported that "there was significantly less anxiety in children whose mothers received auricular acupuncture when they were wheeled into the operating room and when the anesthesia mask was put on their faces."

[4]

As a side-effect, the calmed mothers seem to have passed that calming effect on to their children. These two studies are part of the growing field of Integrative Medicine. As is already common in China, the interweaving of Eastern and Western medicine modalities in primary health care is to be welcomed as beneficial to patients.

[1] Berkow R., Beers M., Fletcher A., The Merck Manual of Medical Information Home Edition. 1999. pp 430-432

[2] Talk Facts About Anxiety Disorders. Copyright 2005 American Psychiatric Association. Created 5/05. Last Rev.11/06. HealthyMinds.org

[3] Wang SM, Kain ZN. Auricular acupuncture: a potential treatment for anxiety. Anesthesia and Analgesia

Feb 2001;92(2):548-553

[4] Davis J., Acupuncture Calms Mom's Stress, Anxiety Acupuncture Makes Moms Less Anxious, Resulting in Less Anxiety in Children . Annual meeting of the American Society of Anesthesiologists, San Francisco, Oct. 11-15, 2003. News release, American Society of Anesthesiologists. 2003 WebMD, Inc.