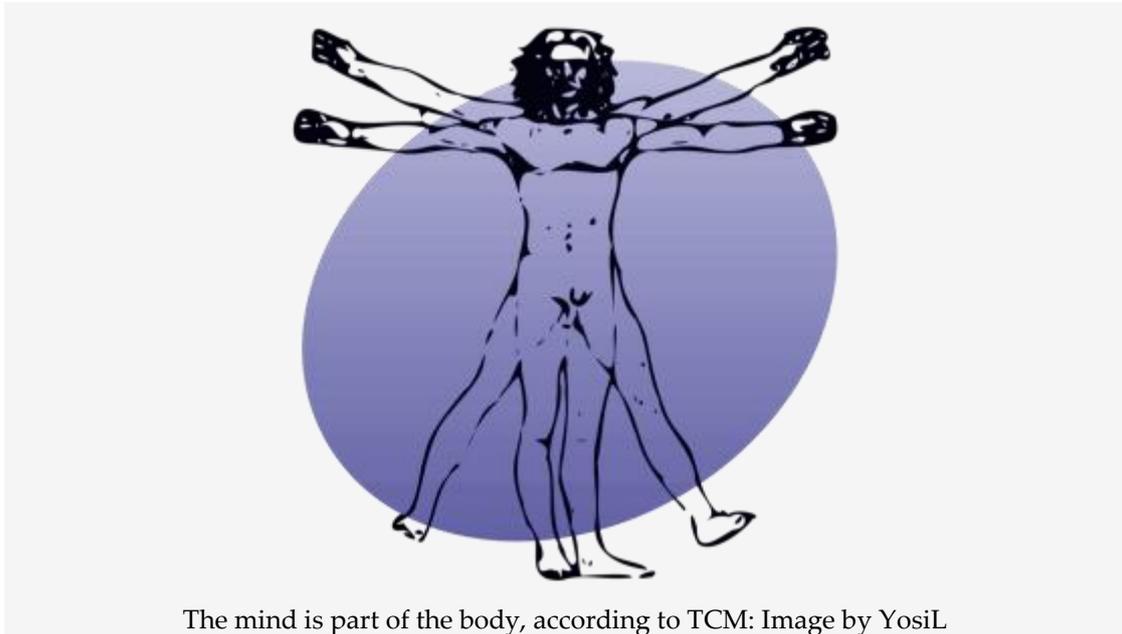


Traditional Chinese Medicine and Pain Relief: The TCM Approach

AUGUST 15, 2013 BY LESLIE COHEN



Is it possible to manage, reduce, or even live without chronic pain? Traditional Chinese Medicine views pain differently than Western medicine, and proposes treatments such as acupuncture for the relief of immediate or chronic discomfort.

The TCM Definition of Pain

The Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) definition of pain is based on the concepts of Yin and Yang, and is significantly different from the definition of pain proposed by Western medicine.

TCM defines pain as an imbalance between Qi (energy) and Blood. This can be due to a deficiency of Qi, or Blood, or it can happen when Qi and Blood become stuck in a specific place. Whenever the free flow of Qi and Blood is obstructed, according to TCM, the organs begin to function improperly and, thus, pain develops.

TCM also believes that pain is either exacerbated or alleviated by the emotional state of the patient, and is often caused by stress. TCM does not differentiate between physical and emotional pain: the TCM practitioner treats the “bodymind.”

TCM Pain Control

According to practitioners and devotees, Traditional Chinese Medicine can do the following:

- TCM can reduce the patient’s level of pain.

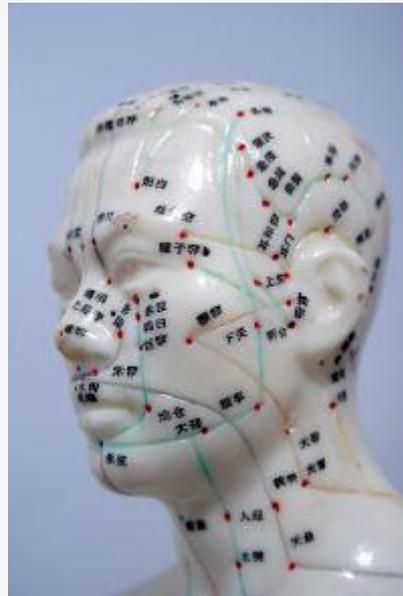
- TCM can improve the patient's ability to deal with pain, and can regulate the negative emotions associated with pain, such as fear, anxiety, frustration.
- TCM can increase energy levels, and increase the patient's ability to perform everyday functions.
- TCM can reduce reliance on Western medications.
- TCM can also enhance the quality of life, and even relieve pain completely.

It is significant to note that TCM is intended to not only treat the pain itself, but also the full range of ailments associated with that pain.

How TCM Practitioners Treat Pain

As with any conventional Western medical practice, the treatment of pain begins with the practitioner taking a detailed history of the patient. According to Peilin, such a history would include many aspects of a patient's life, such as sleep habits, emotions, diet, exercise, previous operations, and an examination of the patient's tongue, pulse, skin color, stool, urine, hair, and breath.

The most common TCM treatment of pain is a combination of acupuncture and herbal medicines. Acupuncture is the practice of inserting very thin needles into the skin for the purpose of stimulating specific points in the body. This therapy is intended to balance the movement of energy in the body, and is often accompanied by local massage and the use of moxibustion – a burning stick of dried herbs that applies heat to a specific area, much like a heating pad or hot water bottle.



Acupuncture points refer to specific body parts-image by Toronox

Acupuncture as an Anesthetic

Hospitals in China regularly use acupuncture, either in conjunction with, or in place of, chemical anesthetics. They offer acupuncture as an alternative for people who are allergic to anesthesia, or otherwise unable to tolerate Western chemical anesthetics.

TCM practitioners say that the advantages of acupuncture as an anesthetic include the following:

- Acupuncture causes fewer side-effects than chemical anesthesia.
- The patient remains alert during surgery, and is better able to cooperate with the doctor during the operation.
- There is a lack of disturbance of the patient's memory after surgery.
- There is a rapid recovery of functional activities after the operation.

On the other hand, TCM practitioners do not consider acupuncture to be an adequate anesthetic procedure for children or senile patients, and agree that it is not able to replace every kind of chemical anesthetic. In some cases, a local chemical anesthetic is necessary.

Modern Research on TCM's Pain Control

Over the years, there have been numerous scientific studies of the ability of acupuncture to control pain. According to Andersson and Lundeberg, in an article published in 1995, the benefits of acupuncture in evoking pain relief have been widely accepted, and are in use in pain control clinics worldwide. In fact, the Mayo Clinic advocates the use of acupuncture for pain relief.

Pain in Western Medicine vs. TCM

Western medicine believes that we feel pain due to the transmission of impulses from the nervous system to the brain.

One Western medical theory is that pain impulses travel along particular neural pathways. Peilin (Doctor of Oriental Medicine) suggests that the pathways defined as "channels" in TCM are the same as the neural pathways defined by Western medicine. Research such as the 1995 article, *"Acupuncture- from Empiricism to Science: Functional Background to Acupuncture Effects in Pain and Disease"* substantiates this suggestion.

Another theory of Western medicine proposes that pain impulses can be blocked from reaching the brain at various "gates" within the nervous system. Peilin suggests that acupuncture intervenes at the appropriate points along the nervous system to prevent pain impulses from reaching the brain.

A third theory of Western medicine is that endorphins are natural pain-relieving substances within the human body, similar to the opiates (such as morphine). TCM practitioners believe that acupuncture stimulates the production of these substances. Furthermore, in a 2006 study, researchers found that acupuncture

increases the level of serotonin in the nervous system, which raises a person's threshold of pain.

TCM Pain Relief: Moderation Spells Prevention

TCM believes that it is more effective to prevent pain than to treat it after it begins, and that acute pain can be treated and eliminated much more quickly than chronic pain. For these reasons, practitioners suggest that it is important to seek treatment before the pain becomes severe. In general, TCM proposes that moderation in one's total life style – specifically diet, exercise, sexual activity, and work – is the best recipe for good health throughout the life span.

Resources

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