



Acupuncture for Mental Health:

Bridging Eastern and Western Medicine



A B O U T

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This handout aims to provide mental health professionals with an understanding of how acupuncture works from both Chinese and Western perspectives, along with references to research in this field.

Understanding Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM):

TCM is a holistic system of healthcare that emphasises the balance of Qi (vital energy) and the harmonious functioning of the body, mind, and spirit. TCM includes various modalities such as acupuncture, herbal medicine, dietary therapy, and mind-body practices like tai chi and qigong.

In TCM, mental health is closely linked to the concept of Qi the vital life force that flows through the body along pathways called meridians and also Shen . Emotional and psychological well-being is believed to be the result of harmonious Qi flow. When this flow is disrupted or imbalanced, and/or the Shen is disturbed it can lead to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress.

Acupuncture, a key component of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), has been practiced for thousands of years. It involves the insertion of fine needles into specific points on the body to balance the flow of energy (Qi) and improve health. In recent years, acupuncture has gained recognition in the West for its potential benefits in treating mental health conditions.

Key TCM Concepts

- Yin and Yang. The balance of opposing forces. An imbalance can cause emotional disturbances.
- Five Elements. Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water correspond to different organs and emotions. For example, the Liver (Wood) is associated with anger, while the Heart (Fire) is linked to joy.
- Shen. In TCM, Shen refers to the mind or spirit. It resides in the Heart and is responsible for consciousness, mental functions, and emotional well-being. Disturbances in Shen can manifest as insomnia, anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues. Acupuncture aims to calm and stabilize Shen, ensuring mental clarity and emotional balance.
- Acupoints. Specific points on the meridians where needles are inserted to regulate Qi flow. Common points for mental health include Yintang (between the eyebrows) and Shenmen (on the ear).

Mechanism in TCM

Acupuncture works by stimulating acupoints to restore the balance of Qi, thus harmonizing the body's internal environment. For instance, if someone experiences anxiety due to a Liver Qi stagnation, acupuncture can help move the stagnant Qi, providing relief from anxiety symptoms.

The Role of Mental Health Counselling

Mental health counselling is a therapeutic approach that aims to improve psychological well-being by addressing emotional and mental challenges. It involves a confidential and collaborative relationship between a trained counsellor and the individual seeking support. Mental health counselling provides a safe space for exploring thoughts, feelings, and behaviours while offering coping strategies and promoting self-awareness.

The Scientific Aspect of Acupuncture in Mental Health

Acupuncture, a key component of TCM, has been studied for its potential effects on various mental health disorders. Scientific research has highlighted several mechanisms through which acupuncture may benefit mental health:

- **Neurotransmitter Regulation:** Acupuncture has been found to modulate neurotransmitter levels in the brain, such as serotonin, dopamine, and GABA, which are implicated in mood regulation and mental health disorders like depression and anxiety.
- **Endogenous Opioid System Activation:** Acupuncture stimulates the release of endogenous opioids, including endorphins, which can enhance mood and alleviate symptoms of depression and other mental health disorders.
- **Stress Response Modulation:** Acupuncture influences the body's stress response system, including the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, leading to the regulation of stress hormones like cortisol. This modulation can be beneficial for individuals with stress-related disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and generalized anxiety disorder.
- **Neural Plasticity and Connectivity:** Acupuncture has been shown to affect neural plasticity and connectivity in the brain, which can contribute to the regulation of mood, emotional processing, and cognitive function in individuals with various mental health disorders.

The Synergy of TCM, Acupuncture, and Mental Health Counselling

By integrating acupuncture with mental health counselling, individuals with common mental health disorders can benefit from a comprehensive and integrated treatment approach. The synergistic effects include:

- **Depression:** Acupuncture, combined with mental health counselling techniques, can help regulate neurotransmitters associated with depression, improve mood, and promote emotional well-being. It can also be integrated with evidence-based treatments like cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) to address cognitive patterns and develop healthy coping strategies.
- **Anxiety Disorders:** Acupuncture's anxiolytic effects, along with mental health counselling interventions, can assist individuals with anxiety disorders in managing symptoms, reducing excessive worry, and promoting relaxation. The combination of acupuncture and

techniques such as mindfulness-based stress reduction or exposure therapy can be particularly beneficial.

- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):** Acupuncture, coupled with trauma-informed mental health counselling approaches, can help regulate the stress response system, reduce hyperarousal, and alleviate PTSD symptoms. It may also support the integration and processing of traumatic experiences.
- **Mood Disorders:** Acupuncture, in conjunction with mental health counselling, can aid in regulating mood and emotions in individuals with mood disorders such as bipolar disorder. It can be used alongside medication and psychotherapy to support overall stability and emotional well-being.

The integration of traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture, and mental health counselling holds significant potential for addressing a range of common mental health disorders. By combining the holistic principles of TCM, the specific effects of acupuncture on the nervous system, and evidence-based mental health counselling techniques, individuals can access a comprehensive and personalised treatment plan that targets the mind, body, and spirit.

It is essential to consult qualified professionals experienced in both TCM and mental health counselling to receive optimal care and achieve positive outcomes in managing mental health disorders.

Research Evidence

- This recent study found that Acupuncture for depression, when compared to conventional pharmacotherapy exhibits significant efficacy as a standalone treatment after four weeks of intervention, with fewer side effects and adverse reactions.(Tan-Duan et Al., 2024).
- A study published in the Journal of Affective Disorders found that acupuncture significantly reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety in patients compared to a control group receiving standard care (Quah-Smith et al., 2013).
- The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine reported that acupuncture

treatment for generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) was as effective as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) in reducing anxiety symptoms (Pilkington et al., 2007).

- A meta-analysis in the Journal of Psychiatric Research indicated that acupuncture had a significant positive effect on reducing symptoms of depression, particularly when used as an adjunct to standard treatments (Smith et al., 2018).

Practical Application for Mental Health Professionals

Mental health professionals can consider incorporating acupuncture into their treatment plans in several ways:

- Referral to AHPRA registered Chinese Medicine Practitioners Collaborate with trained acupuncturists who have a special interest in mental health.
- Integrative Practices. Some therapists may choose to receive additional training in acupuncture to offer this modality directly to their clients however it's a 4 year degree or a 2 years Masters programme.
- Holistic Approach: Combine acupuncture with other therapeutic interventions such as psychotherapy, medication, and lifestyle modifications for a comprehensive approach for mental health care.



Anxiety References

2020 - 2024

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