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PIN DOWN DEPRESSION

For many sufferers, one of the difficulties of living with depression is depending on antidepressants. Now researchers have pin pointed an old therapy as a potentially new treatment. Acupuncture, long a part of Chinese medicine, may be an effective alternative for women with low spirits.

While conventional treatments like psychotherapy and medication alleviate the blues in a whopping 50% to 70% of patients who complete the regimen, about one-third of those who begin therapy never complete it because they see no improvement or experience debilitating side effects. Even among people who do recover in depression, more than one-third relapse within 18 months. So doctors are searching for an alternative remedy--which is why associate professors of psychology John Nlen, Ph.D., and Sabdna Hitt, Ph.D., of the University of Arizona, and Rosa Sohnyder, of the Center for Healing Arts in Tucson, conducted a preliminary study to see if the time-tested healing art of acupuncture would alleviate symptoms of depression.

Acupuncture is performed by licensed practitioners who apply needles to pressure points on the body that affect mental or physical discomfort.

Allen and his team divided 38 clinically depressed women into three groups: one received acupuncture for eight weeks; another was told they would receive needle work for depression but would actually be treated for other related ailments, such as loss of appetite or insomnia. A third group was placed on a waiting list for treatment.

Two months later, 50% of patients getting acupuncture for depression showed no sign of the mood disorder. Only 27% of patients in the other two groups experienced symptom relief, suggesting that it isn't just the act of getting acupuncture that heals, but the actual targeting of pressure points. After this initial testing period, the researchers gave all of the women in the study the treatment for eight weeks, after which 70% of them experienced a drop in depressive symptoms.

"It appears that acupuncture provides rates of relief from depression comparable to those seen in trials of antidepressants or psychotherapy," says Allen, who next plans to test its effects on men. Furthermore, he notes in *Psychological Science*, the precision of needle placement allows for treatment of individuals' personal symptoms--a flexibility drugs just don't offer.

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