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CAN ACUPUNCTURE TREAT FIBROMYALGIA?

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Fibromyalgia syndrome (FMS) is a western medical term describing chronic, debilitating condition of unknown cause characterized by wide-spread, often times severe pain affecting multiple sites of the body including the muscles, joints, neck and back. The condition mostly affects women between 20-50 years of age, and is a major cause of disability in this country.¹ Diagnosis is made after confirmation of pain upon palpation of ten out of eighteen sites located at muscle insertions near bony prominences distributed throughout the body.² The word syndrome in FMS means the condition presents with a varying range of accompanying symptoms and signs. In clinical practice, I have noticed that these patients commonly suffer from depression, fatigue and insomnia. Because the disease does not cause any physical damage to the body or tissues, there is no western, scientific laboratory test x-ray or scan that can confirm diagnosis.³

Unfortunately, standard, western medical care does not have an effective treatment for this disease, in part because it cannot explain why this particular symptom constellation occurs. Western medical treatment consists of drugs aimed at providing symptomatic relief, such as antidepressants, pain and sleep medications, and physical therapy. In contrast, Chinese medicine (acupuncture and herbal therapy) has much to offer fibromyalgia patients, ranging from symptomatic relief to a resolution for this condition.

So how effectively does acupuncture treat fibromyalgia syndrome? A 2005 study by the *International Association for the Study of Pain* compared 50 patients with moderate to severe, non-responsive fibromyalgia, for whom other treatments had been ineffective. Patients in the blind study were given six treatments of either true or sham acupuncture, administered over a two to three week period. Patients receiving true acupuncture experienced significantly greater relief of pain, fatigue and anxiety than the sham acupuncture patients, with the greatest improvement showing one month after the end of treatment. (*The International Association for the Study of Pain 11th World Congress on Pain*, Sidney, Australia).⁴

To illustrate the effectiveness of Chinese medicine in treating FMS, I would like to share with you a stunning example of a patient with typical fibromyalgia symptoms for whom a clinical cure was achieved with acupuncture and Chinese herbal therapy:

I was lecturing at Wofford College in Spartanburg. After class, one of the students came up to me to inquire about acupuncture treatment for his girlfriend who suffered with chronic pain, fatigue and anxiety. She was not getting much relief using standard western medicine. Understandably, this young man was very concerned for his girlfriend and asked if I could help her. I suggested that she make an appointment for an initial evaluation.

When this patient (I'll call her Rebecca) presented for her initial consultation, she brought with her a 1/2" stack of medical reports from previous doctors she had seen over the past two and a half years. Although Rebecca had seen many doctors offering various combinations of drugs, her condition continued to deteriorate and she was having difficulty performing daily functions. Her symptoms included fatigue, poor memory and concentration, low back pain that radiated to her toes and caused numbness and tingling (paresthesia). According to her medical records, the back pain was due to a lumbar disc herniation. She also had severe headaches, menstrual cramping, irritability, anxiety, poor sleep and poor bowel function. I recommended Rebecca begin with weekly acupuncture treatments and prescribed a Chinese herbal formula containing the popular energy boosting herb, ginseng, that Rebecca drank twice a day as a tea.

After the first treatment, Rebecca noticed that her energy had increased, and she had less back and leg pain. After the second treatment, Rebecca's energy showed marked improvement and the leg pain had stopped. She had less anxiety, her bowel function had normalized, headaches were mild and she slept better. By week five her sleep was normal and her concentration had improved. At treatment six Rebecca had only one slight headache, mild back pain with stiffness and her concentration and memory had greatly improved. At this point I decreased acupuncture visits to every other week, and continued herbal therapy.

Two months later at visit nine; Rebecca reported that she only experienced back pain when driving long distances. Her bowels showed continued improvement and she no longer experienced anxiety. Rebecca's energy was steadily increasing. She continued coming twice a month. Three and a half months after beginning acupuncture treatment her symptoms had completely resolved and she was now rock climbing!

This case is a typical example of the symptom and response scenario that acupuncturists see in clinic. Fibromyalgia patients generally respond well in the short term; however, due to the long term, chronic nature of the disorder, it generally takes some time to achieve a clinical cure. Rebecca responded quickly in part due to her young age (22) and because of the fairly recent onset of symptoms at the time she presented for treatment. The majority of patients presenting for Traditional Chinese Medical (TCM) treatment of fibromyalgia have had the condition for five to ten or more years. These cases generally require a longer course of treatment; however, given time, acupuncturists achieve remarkable results in treating fibromyalgia and other chronic disorders.

¹ *The Treatment of Modern Western Diseases with Chinese Medicine 18th Edition*, Flaws B. & Sionneau P. Blue Poppy Press, 2001, p.221.

² *Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary*, Thomas C. F.A. Davis Company 1997, p. 725.

³ *The Treatment of Modern Western Diseases with Chinese Medicine 18th Edition*, Flaws B. & Sionneau P. Blue Poppy Press, 2001, p.221.

⁴ *The Journal of Chinese Medicine*, Number 79, October 2005, p. 70

Experienced, Dedicated, Effective

Kath Bartlett, MS, LAc is the owner of the Asheville Center for Chinese Medicine. Bartlett practices in a traditional Chinese style incorporating acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine, Tui Na massage, dietary and lifestyle counseling to treat a wide variety of health problems. Bartlett achieves effective results when treating chronic health conditions, such as: fibromyalgia, pain, insomnia anxiety and depression.

Bartlett relocated to Asheville from San Diego, California. There, she externed at several University of California, San Diego Medical School sites, including the Owen's Clinic for HIV+ at Mercy Hospital. Bartlett earned her Masters of Science degree in Traditional Oriental Medicine from the respected Pacific College of Oriental Medicine, San Diego. She is board certified in Oriental Medicine by the National Certification Commission of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM). Bartlett completed advance studies of the classics texts of Chinese medical theory with Dr. Min Fan, formally of Bei Jing University. Bartlett received her Bachelor of Arts degree from UCLA.

Bartlett is a member of the Board of Directors of the North Carolina Association of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCAAOM) and is a member at large of the American Association of Oriental Medicine (AAOM).

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