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*Acupuncture
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ACUPUNCTURE: THE STRESS BUSTER

By Kath Bartlett, MS, LAc

Stress. We all have it. The question is, "How do I get rid of it?!"

The answer lies not only in eliminating the causes, but also in learning to manage life's curveballs. Acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine are useful in the management end. Lifestyle counseling can help with the causes. How can acupuncture help, and what can you do stop stress in its tracks?

Before answering that question, let's look at what happens when we get stressed. Mostly, we tense up. This tightening causes our Qi to get stuck. Qi (pronounced chee) is energy, the energy of life. This energy flows through our body. It's Qi (energy) that mobilizes our arms and legs to move, our stomach to digest food, our heart to pump and blood to flow. Without Qi, we're dead, lifeless.

When we get tense the Qi flowing through our body and organs gets stuck. The stuck qi builds up, like a pressure cooker, and eventually needs an escape valve. We might get angry and have outbursts. When Qi gets stuck in the stomach we have digestive problems, like acid regurgitation, or heartburn. (Qi gets stuck, and can't flow down, so it goes upward and escapes out the mouth). Some people get bowel problems, like IBS (Irritable Bowel Syndrome) because this stuck Qi cannot move food through the intestines properly. Did you ever get angry and feel Qi rising to your head (maybe you got warm or red in the face)? This happens because the stuck Qi building up has to be released. It goes up to the head, and can cause migraine or tension headaches, and high blood pressure.

Acupuncture effectively treats disorders caused by stress, by unblocking stuck Qi, allowing it to flow properly throughout the body. We feel more relaxed and food is digested smoothly and moves through the bowels properly. As our tension is relieved, so are the headaches. Instead of being so tense and angry that our blood pressure starts to rise, we remain calm and our blood pressure and our tempers stay even.

Recently, a patient (I'll call him Nick) came to see me for treatment. During the initial intake, I discovered that he had acid regurgitation (heartburn) that is clearly worse with stress and spicy food. Nick told me that his whole abdomen felt large and full after meals (qi is not moving, building up in the stomach). I used acupuncture points that move qi in the stomach, and clear heat (for the burning regurgitation). I prescribed herbs that he cooked and drank twice a day as a tea. After just two treatments, Nick's stomach problem was 80% resolved, and he felt much less tense and worried. Every person responds differently to acupuncture, but this case demonstrates how well stress related problems are treated with acupuncture. When problems linger, then lifestyle changes are also needed.

Stress nothing more than our internal response to outside stimuli. Modifying the way we respond and react to external triggers and the way we live, we can make a great impact to improving health problems caused by stress. Here are 10 things you can do change your response and eliminate stress.

- 1) **Walk away from it.** Walking is a great way to move Qi, so it doesn't get stuck. Sometimes while you're walking you'll see a new way to solve the problem. Somehow in the fresh air life events don't seem so dire, and we begin to relax.
- 2) **Exercise regularly.** Doing regular exercise will move qi and relieve stress. This could include special, meditative Chinese exercises specifically designed to move Qi and relax the mind, such as Tai Qi or Qi Gong, but any exercise will do the job.
- 3) **Breathe.** When life gets overwhelming, take a deep breath, and then slowly release it. Keep going, watching the breath, as it comes in, and as it goes out. Meditation requires you to focus on something other than your problems, like your breath, relaxing music or guided imagery. By doing this, you get your mind off your troubles, and when you come back they seem more manageable. People with regular meditation practices consistently report that they are calmer and less reactive to stress triggers.
- 4) **Eat in a calm, relaxed environment.** Eating on the run can cause digestive problems. Take time to chew thoroughly, taste and smell the aromas. Don't eat and work. Take a break, relax and enjoy your meal.
- 5) **Do one thing at a time.** Resist multi-tasking. Trying to do too many things simultaneously inherently causes tension. Prioritize, and then calmly and efficiently work down the list, one item at a time.
- 6) **Shorten the list.** When you're overwhelmed because of too many to-dos, cross some off the list. Taxes can be extended, deadlines can be post-phoned, and some things will just have to wait.
- 7) **Get help.** Often we feel there's just too much to do, and not enough hours in the day. When that happens, don't try to be superwo/man. Let people know that your plate is overflowing, and enlist aid to get the must-do's done. Often people around us are not aware that we need help because we're not letting them that we do.
- 8) **Attend to your financial health.** Financial stress can be insidious, affecting our emotions, sleep and physical well being. If your income fluctuates, be sure to save enough during the higher months to cover your expenses during the lean months. Is your emergency fund large enough to cover unexpected expenses or sudden changes in employment? (This is generally 8 months expenses kept in cash in the bank.) Having a plan and knowing that you are in control of your finances can go a long way towards relieving this kind of pressure.
- 9) **Laugh.** Laughter is the best medicine. To break the tension, find a way to laugh about it. Or rent a comic movie, and laugh long and hard. You'll find your troubles will melt away.
- 10) **Have fun.** What's life but to be enjoyed? When you troubles are mounting, go do something you love. It's hard to be tense when you're having fun. So whether it's dinner with friends, taking a week-end getaway, or a bubble bath: be sure to make joy part of your lifestyle.

Kath Bartlett, MS, LAc is the owner of the Asheville Center for Chinese Medicine. Bartlett practices in a traditional Chinese style incorporating Dr. Richard Tan's Balance Method of acupuncture (<http://www.acupunctureasheville.com>), Chinese herbal medicine, dietary and lifestyle counseling to treat a wide variety of health condition, including anxiety, insomnia, depression and stress related disorders such as IBS, acid reflux, and hypertension.