

Taming Stress With Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine

My friend, Karla, seems to catch every illness that is going around. She recently had the intestinal flu that her kids caught a few weeks earlier. This was right after she had gotten over a nasty cold. Last week she was laid out with a headache that made it impossible for her to concentrate at work. When I think about Karla, I realize that she is one of the most stressed women I know. She worries about her husband's job, struggles to balance work and her kid's after-school activities, and is the consummate volunteer. She is overwhelmed and on the go, and it makes perfect sense to me that she doesn't feel well much of the time. We know that stress makes us ill; because when we are stressed our bodies produce cortisol and other hormones that in overabundance can damage our health. In addition, prolonged stress keeps our bodies in a constant state of readiness, which is ultimately depleting. Practitioners of Chinese medicine have a different explanation as to how stress makes us ill. According to the Chinese, energy flows in our body through a network of "roads", like a highway system. Stress or anxiety can interrupt the smooth flow of energy throughout the body, acting like a traffic jam. For example, many people who are under a lot of stress complain of upper back, shoulder and neck pain. This is because stress is causing tension in those areas, blocking the free flow of energy, causing pain, tightness, and often leading to headaches. In a highway system, when there is road construction or an accident, traffic may also be backed up on secondary roads that feed into or out of the affected area. This is true in the body, too. Stress may affect many other parts of the body, most notably digestion, the ability to sleep, pain conditions, and immunity. Stress can also aggravate an already troublesome health condition. Through acupuncture, these energy blockages can be addressed. Acupuncture points serve as the on and off ramps to the energy highway, and can help energy flow smoothly, and alleviate not only the symptoms of stress, but the stress itself. Beyond acupuncture, Chinese medicine offers other ways to alleviate stress and move energy including:--Breathing--the breath is a source of energy in Chinese medicine, and slow, deliberate breathing can be very calming.--Gentle exercise, such as Tai Qi or Qi Gung, which is a great way to cultivate and move energy. However very strenuous or prolonged exercise sessions are considered to be depleting.--Good nutrition and digestion. The Chinese consider digestion to be as important as nutrition. They shy away from very cold foods or iced drinks, too many raw fruits and vegetables, and very greasy foods. With my friend Karla in mind, I would also like to add that taking a little time each day for yourself can be a great way to break the stress cycle. Sometimes a few moments of quiet are all it takes.

About the Author

Definitions and essays on alternative medicine ideas and practices with references to the best skeptical.

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