

TCM: acupuncture for insomnia

Everyone has trouble sleeping at some point in their lives, whether it is difficulty falling asleep, waking in the night and being unable to return to the land of nod, dream-disturbed rest or waking too early in the morning. If your sleep problem lasts more than four weeks, seek the advice of a healthcare provider as the problem can often be easily diagnosed and treated.

Insomnia is usually associated with mental fatigue, emotional distress and physical weakness after a long-term illness. In traditional Chinese medicine, mental activities are referred to as *shen* (spirit), so insomnia is a manifestation of a spirit disorder in which various internal disharmonies make the spirit restless and thus create sleeping problems.

Acupuncture is often used to treat insomnia. When needles are inserted at certain body points, a dull ache, heaviness, distension, tingling or electrical sensation will be felt around the needle or travelling up or down the affected meridian. The acupuncturist may experience a tightness and dragging around the needle site.

In TCM there are direct correlations between the organs and mental functions. The heart is the most important as it houses the *shen*. The kidney governs the storage of essence and promotes its transformation into marrow in the brain. The spleen acts as the nourishing source of mental activity. The liver governs the flow and discharge actions that regulate mental activity

directly. And the gall bladder governs some important aspects of mental functioning such as decision making. There is no general acupuncture remedy that fits all insomnia sufferers. Appropriate point selection and stimulating techniques should be based on the diagnosed disharmony patterns.

Needling techniques are selected according to insomnia type, of which there are two. In the first excess type, the *shen* is irritated by pathogens, such as phlegm, fire and dampness, as well as blood stasis. This type of insomnia usually occurs in the early stage of disharmony patterns such as liver stagnation or phlegm-heat harassment. The needling technique is generally rapid, forceful and of a long duration.

In the second, deficient type of insomnia the *shen* is undernourished, a condition where there is insufficient blood. This type of insomnia occurs in those who have chronic illnesses or sleep problems of a long duration. The usual disharmony patterns are deficiencies of the heart and spleen or kidney yin deficiency. This needling technique is generally slow, gentle and of short duration.

In considering acupoint selection, two meridians – the yin heel vessel and yang heel vessel – dominate the activity and resting of the body and also the opening and closing of the eyes: the yin rules the body for rest and to close the eyelids, while the yang makes the body become active and to open the eyelids.

But these meridians do not have their own acupoints, so TCM physicians use their confluent points with other meridians – the *zhao hai* (kidney) and *shen mai* (bladder) – to promote their functioning. Points along the liver, stomach and triple-burner meridians are selected for relieving physical discomfort caused by insomnia.

Points along the heart, pericardium and governor vessel meridians are for nourishing the spirit and calming the mind.

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