Depression is a common mental health problem that affects people of all genders, ages, and backgrounds. About two thirds of adults will at some time experience depression severe enough to interfere with their normal activities (Mintel/YouGov, 2006, Stewart et al, 2004). Women are twice as likely as men to become depressed (Stewart et al, 2004) partly due to hormone changes occurring pre-menstrually, at menopause, during pregnancy or after childbirth.

Depression is estimated to cost the UK £7.5 billion a year in medication, benefits and lost working days (McCrone et al, 2008). The World Health Organization predicts that by 2020 depression will be second only to chronic heart disease as an international health burden (WHO, 2008).

Although everyone occasionally experiences low mood, these feelings usually pass after a couple of days. When a person has clinical depression, these problems can become chronic or recurrent, interfering with daily life. Depression causes symptoms such as low mood, loss of interest in enjoyable activities, anxiety, irritability, low self-esteem, disturbed sleep or appetite, weight change, tiredness, lack of motivation, concentration or libido, physical pain, and suicidal thoughts.

Depression is likely to result from a combination of genetic, biochemical, environmental, and psychological factors. It may be triggered by stressful events, such as bereavement, illness, relationship problems or financial difficulties.

How acupuncture can help

Research has shown that acupuncture treatment can help ameliorate the symptoms of depression. In general, acupuncture is believed to stimulate the nervous system and cause the release of neurochemical messenger molecules. The resulting biochemical changes influence the body's homeostatic mechanisms, thus promoting physical and emotional wellbeing.

Studies indicate that acupuncture can have a specific positive effect on depression by altering the brain’s mood chemistry, increasing production of serotonin (Sprott et al, 1998) and endorphins (Han, 1986). Acupuncture may also benefit depression by acting through other biochemical pathways, including those involving dopamine (Scott et al, 1997), noradrenaline (Han, 1986), cortisol (Han et al, 2004) and neuropeptide Y (Pohl & Nordin, 2002).

Stimulation of certain acupuncture points has been shown to affect areas of the brain that are known to reduce sensitivity to pain and stress, as well as promoting relaxation and deactivating the ‘analytical’ brain which is responsible for anxiety and worry (Wu et al, 1999).

Some of the most recent research suggests that depression is associated with dysfunction in the way that parts of the resting brain interact with each other (Broyd et al 2008). Acupuncture has been shown to be capable of changing this ‘default mode network’ (Dhond et al, 2007), thus providing another possible mechanism for its beneficial effect on depression.

Acupuncture can be safely combined with conventional medical treatments such as anti-depressants, helping to reduce their side effects and enhance their beneficial effects (Zhang et al, 2007).

Acupuncture treatment can also help resolve physical ailments such as chronic pain (Zhao,
Depression 2008), which may be a contributing cause of depression. In addition to offering acupuncture and related therapies, acupuncturists will often make suggestions as to dietary and other lifestyle changes that may be helpful in overcoming depression. Finally, people struggling to cope with depression usually find that coming to see a supportive therapist on a regular basis is helpful in itself.

Full details of research studies into traditional acupuncture treatment for depression can be found below.

**Research**


**Conclusion**

It analysed the pooled results of eight small randomized controlled trials, comprising a total of 477 subjects and concluded; "acupuncture was an effective treatment that could significantly reduce the severity of disease in the patients with depression".


**Meta-analysis**

Systematic review of the role of the default mode network in the pathophysiology of mental disorders.


**Experimental**

fMRI study of brain activity before and after acupuncture. Found that verum acupuncture
Depression


Review of evidence for neural mechanisms underlying acupuncture analgesia and its ability to treat chronic pain.

Fu WB, Fan L, Zhu XP, He Q, Wang L, Zhuang LX, Liu YS, Tang CZ, Li YW, Meng CR, Zhang HL, Yan J. Multi-centre randomized controlled study of acupuncture for depression, involving 440 cases. Found that acupuncture had a better effect of acupuncture on depression to be similar to or better than that of Prozac, with fewer side effects.


Randomized controlled trial involving 42 patients. Found that acupuncture combined with medication was more effective than those who only took medication.


Systematic review and meta analysis of acupuncture as a treatment of depression, which analysed the effect of acupuncture modalities were as effective as antidepressants employed for treatment of depression.


Randomized controlled study of acupuncture for depression during pregnancy, involving 61 women. Found that acupuncture was more effective than either non-specific acupuncture or massage in reducing symptoms of depression.

Randomized controlled study of electroacupuncture for depression, involving 61 patients. Found that electroacupuncture had an antidepressant effect as tetracyclic drug maprotiline with fewer side effects and better symptomatic improvement.


Follow-up study of earlier randomized controlled trial by Allen et al (see below). Found that depression relapse rates among women treated with acupuncture treatment were comparable to those achieved following conventional drug treatments.


Pilot study of electroacupuncture for major depression. Found a decrease of neuropeptide in plasma during treatment.


Randomized controlled study of acupuncture used in conjunction with antidepressants to treat depression. Concluded that acupuncture plus antidepressants improved the course of depression more than medication alone.


Randomized controlled trial of acupuncture treatment in 43 patients with minor depression. Results indicated that acupuncture leads to a significant clinical improvement in depression as well as a marked reduction in anxiety symptoms.

Depression

Experimental study using fMRI to characterize a central nervous system pathway for acupuncture stimulation. Found that acupuncture activates structures of the descending antinociceptive pathway and deactivates areas mediating pain modulation.


Randomized controlled trial of acupuncture for major depression in 33 women. Eight weeks of...[rest of the sentence not clearly visible]


Experimental study of pain modulation by acupuncture in fibromyalgia patients. Found that...[rest of the sentence not clearly visible]


Review exploring physiological basis of acupuncture in the treatment of addiction, in relation to endorphin mechanisms and the reward cascade.


Review presenting evidence that acupuncture can accelerate synthesis and release of serotonin...[rest of the sentence not clearly visible]

Additional references

Mintel/YouGov. Depression poll commissioned by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. 2006 Apr.

Stewart DE, Gucciardi E, Grace SL; Depression. BMC Women’s Health. 2004 Aug 25;4 Suppl
Depression

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