

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 (Intel/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 neurochemical 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,

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

Wang H, Qi H, Wang BS, Cui YY, Zhu L, Rong ZX, Chen HZ. Is acupuncture beneficial in

Meta-analysis which looked at the effects of acupuncture on depression. It analysed 10 clinical trials of acupuncture for depression. The results showed that acupuncture was significantly more effective than control in reducing depression symptoms.

Broyd SJ, Demanuele C, Debener S, Helps SK, James CJ, Sonuga-Barke EJ. Default-mode

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Dhond RP, Yeh C, Park K, Kettner N, Napadow V. Acupuncture modulates resting state

Experimental fMRI study of brain activity and after acupuncture. Found that acupuncture

Zhao ZQ, Neural mechanisms underlying acupuncture analgesia. Prog Neurobiol. 2008 Aug;85(4):55-75.

Review of evidence for neural mechanisms underlying acupuncture analgesia and its ability

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Multi-centre randomized controlled study of acupuncture for depression, involving 440 case

Zhang GJ, Shi ZY, Li CS, Cao SH, observation of Shimening in the treatment of depression by electroacupuncture

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Leo RJ, Ligot JS Jr. A systematic review of randomized controlled trials of acupuncture in th

Systematic review and meta analysis of acupuncture as a treatment of depression, which analyse

Manber R, Schnyer RN, Allen JJ, Rush AJ, Blasey CM. Acupuncture: a promising treatment

Randomized controlled study of acupuncture for depression during pregnancy, involving 61

Han C, Li X, Luo H, Zhao X, Li X. Clinical study on electro-acupuncture treatment for 30 cas

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Gallagher SM, Allen JJ, Hitt SK, Schnyer RN, Manber R. Six-month depression relapse rate

Follow-up study of earlier randomized controlled trial by Allen et al (see below). Found that

Pohl A, Nordin C. Clinical and biochemical observations. *Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine*

Pilot study of electroacupuncture for major depression. Found a decrease of neuropeptide i

Röschke J, Wolf C, Müller M, Wagner P, Lehmann E, Lemmer W, Klieser E, Agelink MW, Eich H. *Journal of Clinical Pharmacy and Therapeutics*, 2006; 31(1-3):73-8

Randomized controlled study of acupuncture used in conjunction with antidepressants to tre

Eich H, Agelink MW, Lehmann E, Lemmer W, Klieser E. Acupuncture in patients with minor

Randomized controlled trial of acupuncture treatment in patients with minor depression. Results indicated th

Wu MT, Hsieh JC, Xiong J, Yang CF, Pan HB, Chen YC, Tsai G, Rosen BR, Kwong KK. Ce

Depression

Experimental study using fMRI to characterize the central nervous system of depression using acupuncture

Allen JJB, Schnyer RN, Hitt SK. The efficacy of acupuncture in the treatment of major depression

Randomized controlled trial of acupuncture for major depression in 33 women. Eight weeks

Sprott H, Franke S, Kluge H, Hein G. Pain treatment of fibromyalgia by acupuncture

Experimental study of pain modulation by acupuncture in fibromyalgia patients. Found that

Scott S, Scott WN. A biochemical hypothesis for the effects of acupuncture in the treatment

Review exploring physiological basis of acupuncture in the treatment of addiction, in relation

Han JS. Electroacupuncture: An alternative to antidepressants for treating

Review presenting evidence that acupuncture can accelerate synthesis and release of serotonin

Additional references

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