

Insomnia Part Two: Treatment with Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine



By: Jenny Crosby, DC
Crosby Chiropractic & Acupuncture Centre

The beauty of traditional Chinese medicine in treating insomnia or any other condition is that treatment is based on the cause, which will be different from one patient to the next.

Traditional Chinese medicine, using both acupuncture and herbs, has been managing the issue of insomnia since the writing of the Yellow Emperor's text more than 2000 years ago.

Virtually everyone experiences a night of insomnia in their lifetime. So, we all know that when we can't sleep well, we become tired, moody and irritable. For those who have insomnia with some degree of regularity, symptoms may also include muscles that become stiff or achy or headaches may start to occur. In addition, it may become difficult to concentrate or function well at home or work. Lack of adequate amounts of sleep over time can also cause serious health problems. Chronic insomnia may result in the onset of the symptoms of fibromyalgia and contribute to cardiovascular stress, not to mention causing countless motor vehicle accidents when insomniacs fall asleep or don't respond quickly enough while at the wheel.

Western medicine and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) have different approaches to insomnia. To Western doctors, insomnia is the inability to sleep soundly. If there are no obvious physical reasons for the sleeplessness (such as severe pain

or sleep apnea), it will usually be seen as an emotional problem such as stress, anxiety or depression. A patient with a mild case of insomnia may be told to manage it with many of the suggestions mentioned in part one of this article. They may be told to get more activity during the day, to cut back on caffeine and use over-the-counter sleep aids. For chronic insomnia, sleeping pills or anti-depressants are generally prescribed.

In TCM, a primary concept is the idea of having a root cause and a branch that is the symptom. Insomnia, in most cases, is not the root issue but is generally considered to be the branch that develops from a root cause. The root cause of insomnia would be considered to be a dysfunction or imbalance of a classical energy or of its organ. Traditional Chinese medicine views almost every type of sleep disorder as stemming from a deficiency or excess of qi mainly in the Kidney, Heart and Liver energies.

In the case of insomnia, the two energies most often imbalanced are the Heart energy and the Liver energy. Each of these two energies (or meridians) houses a specific aspect of the spirit. If these energies are out of balance, they can't house the Shen (the spirit or mind) properly, and the spirit will wander. (In traditional Chinese medicine there is no separation of physical, emotional and spiritual health.) A Shen disturbance can manifest in a number of

ways, including mood disorders and heart palpitations, but insomnia is one of the most common symptoms.



has brought this patient in due to joint pain (the Liver meridian is also responsible for muscle, ligament and tendon health) or due to female cycle issues. The time I most frequently hear that patients awaken is between 1:00 and 3:00 a.m. In traditional Chinese medicine, different meridians (energies) control the body at different times of the day. The Liver energy guides the body from 1:00 to 3:00 a.m. (Liver problems can result from unexpressed anger, stress triggering Liver Chi stagnation and Liver Fire.) Those who wake from 3:00 to 5:00 a.m. usually have Lung meridian energy issues. (The emotion attached to the Lung is usually grief.)

Sleep disturbed by vivid dreams.

There are two categories of dream-disturbed sleep. The first involves nightmares and is normally an issue of the Gallbladder meridian. The second, which I see predominantly in adults, is the type of insomnia where we go over and over the same things in

our dreams, reliving aspects of our jobs or our relationships. This type of dream-disturbed sleep is generally more of a Spleen/Heart meridian issue. Patients who present with this type of insomnia will often tell me "I just can't shut my mind off at night."

Inability to get to sleep.

This is usually related to an excess

Insomnia in traditional Chinese medicine can have many different root causes. The most commonly seen types of insomnia and their causes include:

Waking at a specific time of night.

This type of insomnia is the one I see most frequently in my office, probably because the Liver meridian

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