Lend Me Your Ear: Using Auricular Acupuncture to Treat Substance Use and Anxiety/Depression

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History

Auricular acupuncture for addictions was first introduced to the United States on an outpatient basis in 1974 at Lincoln Hospital, located in the south Bronx area of New York City. Dr. Michael O. Smith, MD, Dipl. Ac., psychiatrist and acupuncturist modified the known acupuncture treatments which were used for pain, anxiety and addiction (primarily of opiates) into a simple five point system. The treatment was initially used to help with heroin addiction, withdrawals, and to provide an alternative to methadone. This treatment quickly branched out to help people using other substances and currently is used to help various mental health issues as well.

This treatment is known as the Wellness protocol and the NADA protocol. Dr. Smith founded the National Acupuncture Detoxification Association (NADA). The goal of NADA is to provide treatment of all addictions and compulsive behaviors by facilitating balance and wholeness in the mind, body and spirit.

The NADA/Wellness protocol has been so successful that treatment facilities across the United States and Canada began incorporating acupuncture into their substance abuse programming. This treatment is now used all over the world. Going further, acupuncture is now being used for patients with depression, anxiety and PTSD.

Acupuncture Detoxification Needle Points

There are five acupuncture detoxification needle points. They are listed below with the associated functions:

1. Sympathetic: (Autonomic Nervous System)
This point alleviates stress in the autonomic nervous system (fight or flight). This basic response to perceived danger evokes great anxiety and translates into a powerful stress response in the mind, nervous system, and organs of the body.
Negative Emotions: anxiety; Positive Emotions: Calmness

2. Shen Men: ("Spirit Gate")
This point alleviates anxiety, pain, excessive sensitivity, controls nervousness, has a general relaxing effect, lowers defenses, promotes the ability to love self and others, and helps to bring the "spirit heart" (Heart Energetic) into balance for a Conscious Self.
Negative Emotions: impatience, mood swings, cruelty; Positive Emotions: joy, calm, honour

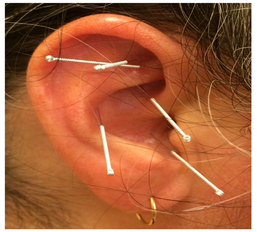
3. Kidney: (Essential Energy – Yin & Yang Source)
This point alleviates toxicity in the kidneys from chemical use, purifies the blood, and strengthens the nervous system. This point reduces excess swelling in the body. This point calms fears, promotes clear thinking and removes insecurities. As the source of the Yin & Yang energy, it is related to the Life Force and Longevity.
Negative Emotions: fear/paranoia, anguish: Positive Emotions: awareness, gentleness

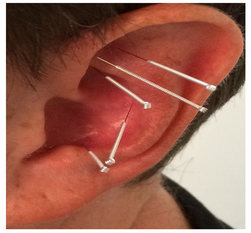
4.Liver: (Emotional Balance – rules the flow of Chi)
This point alleviates toxicity in the blood in conjunction with the kidney by stimulating internal healing. It also helps with cramps and pain, depression, frustration and anger. Balance of liver energy increased emotional balance for relaxation and confidence. It also stabilizes impulsive behavior and mood swings.
Negative Emotions: anger/rage, depression; Positive Emotions: kindness, balance

5.Lung: (Life Force Balance – Rules Chi)
This point alleviates toxicity in the immune system, respiration, regulates pores and skin function and promotes physical balance and the expression of feelings—especially sadness. Also promotes relaxation, sense of hope, connection, self-respect and increases inspiration. This is a nourishing organ involved in the very balance of the Life Force itself.
Negative Emotions: grief, sadness; Positive Emotions: courage, righteousness

Benefits

- Safe and chemical free. Acupuncture can replace and often reduces having to take anti-anxiety and other medications which are highly addictive.
- Relieves depression, anxiety and helps patient's mood stabilize.
- Reduces physical symptoms of withdrawal.
- Reduces/relieves the length, intensity and amount of cravings for substances.
- Stimulates the body to heal itself.
- Improves sleep.
- Patients can receive acupuncture at any point in their healing journey from still using substances, to harm reduction all the way to abstinence and staying substance free.





SETFHT Program

SETFHT has several IHPs who offer smoking cessation counselling and free Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) to smokers who are ready to quit. The Addiction and Mental Health counsellor also sees patients with other substance use/abuse issues and offers treatment and referral.

In order to augment the available services for individuals with all forms of substance use/abuse, we wanted to introduce acupuncture to SETFHT to help patients improve their lives through this proven treatment. The Addictions & Mental Health Counsellor has been providing auricular acupuncture through the NADA protocol for almost eight years in various settings, including withdrawal management centres, residential units, and day programs. Whether the patient's goal is harm reduction or complete abstinence and relapse prevention, this method has worked in conjunction with other treatment approaches. This treatment creates another path for patients, particularly those looking for an holistic approach rather than taking medications.

The equipment and tools needed are very easy to order and low cost. SETFHT did not require any additional insurance coverage to offer this treatment.

SETFHT began providing acupuncture to patients experiencing substance use in May 2015 on a trial basis. The treatment has been provided to patients who have used a variety of substances including tobacco. Acupuncture is offered as part of addiction counselling sessions or by itself as the main focus of the appointment.

Protocol

This is a non-verbal approach that involves inserting five small sterilized disposable needles into the ear which are connected to various parts and functions of the body. Patients are provided the same treatment and will sit quietly for 30-45 minutes normally. The treatment is ideally provided in a group a setting which helps patients build a sense of community and have a sense of belonging. However, as this was a pilot at SETFHT, most sessions were offered as individual sessions.

Outcomes

32 patients have been provided 76 treatments of acupuncture. Of the 32 patients, 12 completed evaluation forms after receiving at least three treatments. The evaluation form looked at areas such as reduction in cravings, ability to control anger, improvements in self-esteem, sleep, energy, depression/anxiety and stress reduction.

- 83% (10 out of 12) patients reported having a reduction in depression/anxiety, reduction in cravings for drugs/alcohol/tobacco, and that they are more accepting of their substance use problems.
- 67% (8 out of 12) of patients reported that their thinking was clearer.
- 50% of patients reported feeling less stress and improved self-esteem.

Future Directions

We will continue collecting data from all participants. We are especially interested in whether or not the results peak at a particular point (e.g., after a certain number of sessions) and if participants report sustained progress even after they stop coming in for acupuncture.

The MD group at SETFHT was very supportive of piloting this program. In fact, they were so enthusiastic that they wanted to open the pilot to patients with depression and anxiety and no substance use issues. Because it was a pilot, we restricted participation to those patients with self-identified substance use issues. Now that we can demonstrate tangible results with our pilot group, we would like to explore:

- Offering auricular acupuncture in groups.
- Offering auricular acupuncture to patients without substance use but with mild to moderate depression/anxiety.