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### Natural help for Insomnia

We all know the feeling: it's the middle of the night and you can't sleep. You toss and turn and wonder how you'll ever get through the work day tomorrow.

Almost everyone has experienced insomnia at some point in their life. In most, it is fleeting; often occurring during a stressful time. In some, however, insomnia becomes chronic and negatively affects all aspects of life. I encounter insomnia almost daily in my Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and Acupuncture practice. Sleep is often the first issue I will address in clients with multiple health problems, because it is so integral to well-being, both physical and emotional.

I have found that TCM can work wonders in naturally restoring deep, restful sleep. Chinese Medicine works differently than western, drug-based medicine in that it treats the person, not the disease – and every person is different. Through a series of questions regarding physical and emotional symptoms, as well as pulse and tongue diagnosis, the practitioner determines where the imbalance lies in the body. Through acupuncture, herbs, and dietary and lifestyle suggestions, the root source of the insomnia is treated, and the symptoms fall away.

Stress is one of the most common culprits in insomnia. We simply have too much on our minds, and can't shut our thinking off when we go to bed. In TCM, it is the Liver system that takes the brunt of stress. Anger, irritability and digestive disturbances are other symptoms that may accompany insomnia caused by Liver imbalances. Vivid, disturbing dreams, and waking up between 1 and 3 am and are other classic symptoms.

Chronic pain is another common cause of insomnia. Of course we can't rest when our body is hurting! In TCM, all pain is due to a blockage in the flow of *Qi* (bioenergy) and blood. Acupuncture can help by restoring the flow, thus reducing pain and calming the mind.

One of the main tenants in TCM is that *Yin* and *Yang* must be balanced for health. *Yin* is a cooler, more restful energy, while *Yang* is a hotter, more active energy. In TCM, restful sleep depends on *Yin* energy in the body. Often, when a client presents with insomnia, there is a weakness in the *Yin*, which allows the hotter, more active *Yang* energy to take over. This pattern may be caused by over-work, "running on empty" and prolonged stress, all of which can burn up our body's *Yin*. Anxiety, restlessness, heat, thirst, and jittery energy may accompany the insomnia. This pattern is also common in menopause, when the *Yin* energy naturally declines. I have found Acupuncture and herbs to be extremely effective in this situation, restoring sleep and decreasing the accompanying hot flashes and night sweats.

In our fast-paced society that values productivity and busyness, the quiet, restful *Yin* aspect of life is often ignored. The heart, which in TCM is the same as the mind, cannot rest. It is while we are asleep that our *Shen*, the spirit which resides in the heart, travels, processing and assimilating our day-time experiences into wisdom and nourishment. It is during dream-time that we make sense of our lives. When we do not get adequate rest, we become not only physically exhausted, but also overwhelmed and emotionally imbalanced.

Everything is related in the body and mind. Clients who are being treated for insomnia are often surprised to find improvement in other aspects of their health too – better energy, improved digestion, and a general sense of well-being and lightness.

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