

Clinical Pearls

How Do You Treat Chronic Adult Insomnia in Your Practice?

Medical Acupuncture is pleased to continue this new regular feature, Clinical Pearls, which we trust will be useful to the readership. All of us are confronted with clinical challenges, especially when dealing with therapeutic strategies. We hope you will find this ongoing collection of Clinical Pearls at your fingertips, ready to put into action for the benefit of our patients—and even ourselves. How often do we ask our colleagues, “How do you treat. . . ?” To continue this new endeavor, we posed the question: “How do you treat chronic adult insomnia? Here are the “Pearls” we received. We trust that the readership will participate in this section by either asking the questions or supplying the “Pearls.” We welcome your input. Please address your “Pearls” to our Managing Editor at RosalynR@aol.com.

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The energy that flows through the channels moves in an organized fashion according to the Chinese Clock. Thus, energy flows from the Liver (LR) Channel to the Lung (LU) Channel at about 3 AM. The Liver energy can get stuck easily: by frustration and anger, by injury to tendons and ligaments, or by drugs and other liver toxins. The result is that the patient wakes up on or about 3 AM and has difficulty resuming sleep. Sometimes, due to empty Lung energy, the patient may get asthmatic or allergic symptoms or shortness of breath at this time.

The block can be felt on the pulse, as the Liver pulse (deep second position on the left wrist, over the radial styloid) is full or bounding, and the Lung pulse (deep first or distal position on the right wrist) is comparatively empty.

The treatment is to needle LR 14, the exit point of the Liver, and the entry point of the Lung, LU 1. Sometimes this treatment can be supported by using the Source Points of the Liver (LR 3) in sedation, and, if the pulse and the patient presentation warrant, tonifying the Lung (LU 9 or LU 8, most commonly). There should be an immediate change of the Liver and Lung pulses toward balance.

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I have treated sleep problems/insomnia the same as addiction. Mainly, with 4 leads, 1 on each arm with positive needle at LI 11 and negative at LI 4; also with 2 leads to the lower extremities, positive at ST 36 and negative at SP 6. I use a frequency of 4, 5, or 6 Hz, depending on response, for 30 minutes. Usually, I need do no more than 3 or 6 treatments.

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Restless leg syndrome (RLS) is a common cause of insomnia in adults, afflicting up to 15% of the adult population and increasing with age.^{1,2} Patients experience uncomfortable, difficult-to-describe leg symptoms including paresthesias (often described as a crawling sensation), tingling, aching pain, and involuntary leg “jumping.” The symptoms are usually worse at night and typically prevent or interrupt sleep. Most patients report a need to get up out of bed and move to relieve the discomfort. RLS is “idiopathic” in most people, but has been associated with iron deficiency, pregnancy, diabetes, and rheumatoid arthritis. Pharmacologic management may include ropinirole, levodopa, benzodiazepines, opioids, and anticonvulsants.

A review of the acupuncture literature found only 1 case report of acupuncture treatment for this condition.³ I recently treated an 84-year-old woman with acupuncture who re-

ported a 10-year history of RLS and severely disturbed, fragmented sleep. She awoke multiple times per night with legs jerking, right lateral thigh and calf paresthesias, and “electrical shocks.” I chose to needle LR 3 bilaterally for its sedating and calming properties. I also needled GB 34 and GB 39 bilaterally, in view of the distribution of the symptoms and their roles as the Hui points for tendons/muscles and marrow, respectively.

The patient reported dramatic relief of her symptoms with the initial treatment, sleeping for 6–8 uninterrupted hours for 10 consecutive nights. Improvement has been sustained with ongoing treatment.

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While patients may identify longstanding insomnia as their only problem, it seldom is. Often, the symptom is part of lifetime adjustments. Historical issues are reflected in current habits and relationships. These lead to energetic blocks and imbalances.

Chronic imbalances appear best addressed by the Extraordinary Meridians, at least initially. In chronic insomnia, there is disrupted energy flow from head to foot. For example, insomniac women with child abuse, childbirth, or gynecologic surgery may have palpable blockage of this flow. (Skin beneath the naval may be cooler than above.)

I most frequently connect the Chongmai with Yinweimai using Manaka Ion Cords. The Master Point may be SP 4 or LR 3, depending on relative tenderness and whether the predominant affect is worry or anger; the Coupled Point is PC 6.

Additional stimulation *while the cords are in place* effectively directs flow and further balances energy. A cool abdomen may warm from electric moxa or photon stimulation in the lower warmer. Stasis in the frontal and maxillary sinuses (dusky color with point tenderness) can block up/down energy flow. Essential oils that “open orifices” without adding Qi, such as cypress and lemon, can be applied over the cheek bones and forehead. These treatments can also be prolonged with ear acupuncture.

As a psychiatrist, I find office acupuncture, alone, may not be enough for those patients I see. If the patient has a dominant negative affect, like fear or anger, the balance attained in treatment will be undone all-too-quickly by the person’s psyche. The latter will ultimately be more powerful than any intervention, as demonstrated by the placebo and reverse placebo effect.

To effectively treat chronic insomnia, we must also address this negativity, and so must the patient. The mindset that created the symptom and imbalance is 24/7 and nothing less than the patient’s nightly engagement with this issue will make an impact. Patients need to feel our healing intent in the office and also “invoke” this intent for themselves when they go to bed. I prescribe specific home treatments to ritualize this process.

For example, a woman with repressed childhood abuse becomes panic-stricken at night and may not turn off lights. She needs to experience her own space as safe. Surrounding her bed with personal and/or religious objects sometimes accomplishes this. She also needs to rebalance the inevitable Heart fire that flares during her panic. *Her* nightly application of essential oils, like jasmine, to: CV 15, CV 17, CV 22, SP 21, HT 7, and PC 6 should accomplish some of this and also empower her.

Treating chronic insomnia does not seem simple. As a psychiatrist, I find that the insomnia “complaint” is usually the ticket to treatment for more complex, hidden issues.

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In Chinese medicine, sleep is seen as active Yang energy moving inward to be enfolded by Yin. If there is too much Yang energy at night, relative to Yin, then insomnia may ensue. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) descriptive diagnoses range from excess conditions such as Liver Fire and Phlegm Heat, to deficient conditions such as Spleen and Heart Blood deficiency, Kidney Yin deficiency, and Liver and Gallbladder deficiency.

Regardless of the TCM diagnosis, an effective whole system approach will only involve acupuncture as part of a multi-pronged approach. Since the manner in which excess Yang arises is often related to the Biopsycho-type, one easy-to-remember strategy uses BL 66 (Water point on the Tai Yang Water Meridian which traverses the head) as a transmitting point for Yin energy, with other Yang meridian Water points as receiving points, in conjunction with head focusing points to direct the Yin energy to the mind¹ (Table 1).

Other useful points include those with calming properties, both in the periphery, such as HT 3 and 7; and in the head, such as GV 20 and 24.5, and Anmian (Ex).

| <i>Biopsychotype</i> | <i>Transmitting Tai Yang Water Point</i> | <i>Receiving Yang Meridian Water Points</i> | <i>Head Focusing Points</i> | <i>General Points</i> |
|----------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| ShaoYang—Jue Yin | BL 66 (Tonggu) | GB 43 (Xiaxi), TH 2 (Yemen) | GB 4 (Hanyan) TH 22 (Heliao) | GV 20 (Baihui) 24.5 (Yintang) |
| TaiYang—ShaoYin | BL 66 | SI 2 (Qianggu) | BL 2 (Cuanzhu) SI 19 (Tinggong) | Anmian (Ex) HT 3 (Shaohai) |
| YangMing—TaiYin | BL 66 | ST 44 (Neiting), LI 2 (Erjian) | ST 8 (Touwei) LI 20 (Yingxiang) | HT 7 (Shenmen) |

TABLE 1. Acupuncture points for calming the mind

Herbs can be directed toward calming the Spirit, tonifying/nourishing the Blood, and removing heat from the Heart. Formulas like *Ding Xin Wan*, *Tian Wang Bu Xin Wan*, or *Gui Pi Tang* can be useful. I tend to gravitate toward *Health Concerns* products like *Schizandra Dreams*, *Shen Gem*, and *Calm Spirit*.² However, both of the above strategies are best grounded in the context of a balanced daily routine:

- Bedtime well before 10:00 PM; rise early, by 6:00AM
- Evening meal should not be too large, and at least 2 hours before bedtime
- Avoid spicy, hot, or hard-to-digest foods
- Avoid coffee, alcohol, or other stimulants in the evening
- Minimize mental activity after dinner
- Chamomile or Valerian tea
- Foot massage with sesame or olive oil.

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In treating chronic insomnia in adults, I generally first attempt to identify any organic cause and make a Western diagnosis in addition to the Oriental diagnosis. Most of my experience is when the insomnia is associated with myofascial syndromes or associated with another neurological or psychiatric disorder. The most helpful guide to me has been Giovanni Maciocia's *Principles and Practice of Traditional Chinese Medicine*.¹

Patterns such as Heart Qi Stagnation, Heart Blood Defi-

ciency, Heart Fire Blazing, Liver Fire, Phlegm Fire Misting the Mind, and the Hun being unrooted all are fairly common and have treatment protocols using front and back points. Herbal equivalents in the *Three Treasures* formulas, such as *Calm the Shen*, *Drain Fire*, *Clear the Soul*, and *Root the Spirit*, as well as Ted Kuptchuk's *Ka'n* formula, *Compassionate Sage*, are very effective.

Acupoints HT 5 (which is also a good aphasia point), Ren 14, BL 15, and BL 44 (both with 2 Hz tonification) treat Heart Qi stagnation; SP 6, LR 8, BL 15, BL 17, and BL 44 nourish Heart Blood; HT 8, PC 7, Du 24, and Ren 15 treat Heart Fire; SP 6, KI 3, LR 2, Du 24, BL 18, and BL 47 drain Liver Fire. ST 40, LU 7, KI 6, BL 22, and ST 8 can be used to treat Phlegm. Weekly treatments for 5–10 weeks are usually helpful, especially when added to the above herbal formulas.

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A good night's sleep usually depends on the state of Blood and Yin, especially of the Heart and Liver. Chronic insomnia may be due to the Mind (Shen) or Ethereal Soul (Hun) not being anchored in Heart-Blood (or Heart Yin) and Liver-Blood (or Liver-Yin), respectively. Insomnia associated with frequent dreams and anxiety may be attributed to deficiency of Blood of the Heart and Spleen. Difficulty falling asleep may be caused by Liver-Blood deficiency. Insomnia with frequent waking up and night sweating usually reflects Heart and Kidney-Yin deficiency.

The most common points used in treating insomnia are HT 3 (Shao Hai), BL 14 (Jue Yin Shu), KI 6 (Zhao Hai), and GV 20 (Bai Hui).

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Treatment of chronic insomnia should address both the root cause and the branch symptom of the illness. The branch treatment can be used in most presentations, including calming points such as Yin Tang, PC 6, Ear Shenmen, DU 20, and Si Shen Cong. The root treatment addresses the Heart, Liver-Gallbladder, and Stomach. The Heart houses the spirit; Yin and Blood deficiency will irritate the spirit causing insomnia characterized by restlessness, anxiety, and

palpitations. Sweating hands, a red complexion and red tongue signal Yin deficiency, while pale white complexion with a pale tongue reveals Blood deficiency. For both patterns, use HT 7 threaded to HT 5. For Blood deficiency, add SP 6 and SP 10, but for Yin deficiency, focus more on the Kidney with KI 2, KI 4, or KI 6. Stress and frustration can cause insomnia from Liver Qi stagnation. This pattern is associated with irritability, tightness in the chest and rib-sides, and neck pain. Use LV 3 and LI 4 for Liver Qi stagnation; in severe cases, add LV 2 and LV 14. Often it is helpful to smooth the Liver Qi through the Gallbladder with GB 41 or GB 40. If there are also digestive complaints from stress, use LV 13 rather than LV 14. Sometimes, stagnation in the stomach harasses the spirit, which will cause insomnia with bloating, belching, and nausea. For this condition, use ST 36 and PC 6. For severe stomach stagnation, add ST 44.

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