

# Acupuncture and Addiction

By Brian Benjamin Carter, B.Ph., H.H.P.

Millions of people have suffered from their own or someone else's addiction. I'm not talking about craving a few brownies. I'm talking about gambling, cocaine, the Internet, heroin, alcohol, nicotine, crack cocaine, marijuana, caffeine, pornography, food, sugar and prescription drug addiction. Addiction takes a huge emotional toll on everyone, has profound financial and legal consequences, and dashes the hopes and dreams of families everywhere.

If you've never experienced the throes of addiction yourself, it's hard to understand. It centers in the mind and is one of the only diseases that tells people they aren't sick. Its victims persist in self-destruction despite extreme consequences. Fighting addiction is not a quick process, but it can be accomplished with the right tools.

Acupuncture is proving to be one of those tools. This ancient therapy has helped pull alcoholics and addicts back from the edge, eased them through withdrawal, and aided their return to functional lives. Acupuncture is neither substitute, nor cure. It is a complementary treatment giving addicts a better chance at recovery.

In 1972, neurosurgeon Dr. H. L. Wen made a significant finding. As he was preparing a patient for surgery using ear acupuncture for pain relief, the patient reported that his opium withdrawal symptoms had coincidentally subsided. In light of this information, Wen tested the same procedure on other addicts and found their discomfort diminished as well.<sup>1</sup>

Acupuncture has been helping alcoholics and addicts detox at Lincoln Hospital in New York since 1975. According to acupuncturist Ricardo B. Serrano, "The mechanisms of acupuncture detoxification can be described metaphorically. The lack of inner calm due to intense and frequent use of chemical substances is related to a pattern called 'empty fire' wherein aggressive heat overcomes the body's yin, thus causing restlessness and agitation."<sup>2</sup>

Acupuncture treatment of the ear works on the root of addiction: mental obsession. The key ear points are Shen Men, Sympathetic, Kidney yin, Liver and Lung. The bladder, stomach, spleen, circulation and the heart might also be needled, depending upon the addiction and the addict. Even more points help ease withdrawal symptoms, including vomiting, headaches, exhaustion and insomnia.

From an Oriental medicine standpoint, the ear points are calming and regulate the Liver, Lung and Kidney Yin. From a biomedical perspective, ear points may work via the cranial nerves (which originate in the brain stem and innervate the ear.) It is thought that stimulation of these nerve terminals in the ear generate a neural chain of events responsible for the feeling of

relaxation. Indeed, research has demonstrated that acupuncture can influence the neurochemical pathways of the brain, in particular the area involved in the mechanism responsible for reward and pleasure. Microdialysis and blood samples from laboratory animals have shown an increase of endogenous opiates in the central and peripheral nervous system after acupuncture stimulation.<sup>3</sup> More recent research also demonstrates the involvement of enkephalines.<sup>4</sup>

Numerous studies done by the National Acupuncture Detoxification Association (NADA) have validated the effectiveness of acupuncture for alcoholism and addiction. In 1987, 80 chronic homeless alcoholic men were divided into two groups matched for drinking history and prior treatment experience. The control groups were given sham acupuncture, needled at non-therapeutic points a few millimeters away from standard points. In the treatment group, 93% completed the eight-week treatment regimen, compared with 2.5% of the control group. During the six-month follow-up of the two groups, the control group had more than twice as many drinking episodes and had to be readmitted to detox more than twice as often as the experimental group.<sup>5</sup> NADA also advises administering the Chinese herbal formulas Chai Hu Long Gu Mu Li Tang and Xiao Chai Hu Tang for withdrawal symptoms.<sup>6</sup>

When ear acupuncture is used in an inpatient detoxification setting, alcoholic seizures virtually disappear, even without the use of pharmaceutical intervention. One of the first residential detox programs to implement acupuncture was Portland's Hooper Memorial Detox Center in 1987. Clients entering this five-day residential program were six times less likely to return in the following six months than clients who entered the facility prior to the implementation of twice-daily acupuncture, and the program's overall completion rate increased from 60% to 92%.<sup>7</sup> **M&B**

## Sources

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