Mind Body Treatment for Anxiety and Panic Disorders

by Michael Mayer, PhD


Anxiety Disorders: Socio-Political and Economic Background

Anxiety and panic are some of the most common issues treated by therapists in our culture. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that anxiety disorders afflict eight percent of the population. Three million Americans are said to suffer from panic disorder or recurrent attacks of anxiety, while eleven million suffer from such variations as phobias, obsessions and compulsions, and chronic levels of apprehension and dread (Breggin, 1991, p. 220).

Many millions of people in our culture use medication for anxiety, creating a multibillion-dollar pharmaceutical industry. A wide variety of questions have been raised as to whether it might be better to make fewer trips to the pharmacy (Altrocchi, 1994). The side effects of anti-anxiety drugs are many, including severe withdrawal symptoms and "rebound anxiety." The use of the medication can even eventually cause an increase of the very symptoms that the drug is supposed to ameliorate. Some medications may even cause brain damage (Breggin, 1991, pp. 244-253.) Also, once a person begins to take these drugs it is difficult, if not impossible, for a therapist or a client to determine whether therapeutic improvements are a result of the medication or the other components of the therapy.

Various forms of meditation techniques have been shown through reputable studies to effect anxiety and panic attacks. In one study, Dr. Kristeller, from the University of Massachusetts Medical School’s Department of Behavioral Medicine, in conjunction with Dr. Kabat-Zinn, researched the effects of mindfulness meditation training at their stress clinic and "found that both anxiety and depression dropped markedly in virtually every person in the study" (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 336).

What Qigong Offers to Anxiety Treatment

Having practiced and taught Qigong for over twenty years, I began to wonder whether elements of qigong could help psychotherapy patients suffering from anxiety disorders. As a traditionally trained psychologist, I was suspicious of claims that any single type of physical intervention could be a panacea for anxiety.

Our anxieties have deep roots in our character structures, our introjected family of origin messages, our beliefs, and in the very condition of being human. The roots of our problems cannot be superficially remedied by a drug, or by the activation of chemicals in the brain that are stimulated by Western forms of exercise, or even by meditative techniques such as Qigong.

In this sense, anxiety is not, in its deepest essence, a demon to be slain or defeated. Since the time of the cavemen and cavewomen, anxiety has operated as a signal to warn of danger. Homo sapiens would not have survived without acting on their anxieties about that noise the saber-toothed tiger made in the woods at night. Likewise today, anxiety signals the fight-or-flight response in the modern individual who faces the dangers of modern society; as well, it signals us about emotional threats, and it lets us know when we’ve strayed from our life’s purpose. To attempt to slay anxiety is to attempt to destroy the barometer of our souls.

However, despite our philosophical understanding that anxiety has purpose, anyone who suffers from an anxiety disorder knows how vital it is to find a moment of relief from its debilitating effects. Relaxation tools can provide these moments of relief, thereby serving as anchors in the sometimes chaotic or overwhelming sea of life. Once relaxed, we can get in touch with our observing selves in order to reflect upon our issues. Qigong, with its breathing methods and internal martial arts techniques, has evolved over many thousands of years to help us cultivate the awareness and ability to meet fearful situations by cultivating "a neurophysiology of harmony" (Diepersloot, 1995, p. xvi). Qigong and hypnosis give us the ability to relax, center, and transcend our ego’s limitations by tapping into a wider source of energy – the energy of life, called Universal Qi. We thereby can get distance from the “demons of life,” and meet them from a place of connecting with the powerful energy of our transpersonal Selves. On the other hand, Western psychotherapy provides the skills to go into, understand, work through, and transmute our underlying psychological patterns - including debilitating forms of anxiety.

Case Illustration: Panic Disorder

Shelly was a 23-year-old woman who had just landed her first job as a graphic artist for a big company. When she first came into my office she was very stiff and her face was frozen, showing almost no emotion. She told me: Whenever too many jobs back up, I have to leave my cubicle. I tell my fellow employees that I have to go to the bathroom - but in reality I’m sweating, heart palpitations and dizziness come over me like an unwanted plague. Sitting on the toilet seat in the bathroom with the door closed, I hope no one will discover what’s going on with me. Finally the panic lessens.

Shelly was literally petrified that her boyfriend and friends would find out about her attacks and reject her. Before our therapy Shelly suffered from adverse side effects from medications used to alleviate her anxiety, so she wanted to find an approach that did not require medication. She told me that she had been to a psychiatrist who, according to Shelly, "tried to push on me the idea that my issues related to the fact that I had been adopted when very young." She left treatment with the psychiatrist because she felt that her anxiety couldn’t have anything to do with her early life since she had such a loving relationship with her adopted parents. After establishing rapport with Shelly, and sending her to a doctor who ruled out medical complications, I wanted to first help Shelly control her symptoms.

Self-Soothing Using Acupressure Points: The Dao of Re-Parenting

The Dao of re-parenting uses the felt sense in the body and imagery to facilitate the re-parenting of vulnerable emotions. First we try to find an image and a felt sense of our actual parents soothing us, but if blocks exist, archetypal imagery can be used to find an energetic connection with a universal mother or father figure.
"Then one day while I was doing some anthropological research, I was amazed when I saw a picture of the Chiltan Spirit Posture... It was exactly what I was doing with my patients."

In the beginning, Shelly held a pillow and tried to imagine her mother soothing her by being compassionate and non-judgmental about her problems getting enough things done at work. Since her natural parents had rejected her, and though there was much love with her adopted parents, Shelly realized she didn't fully trust the unconditional love of her adopted parents. Because she had a hard time finding a self-soothing figure in her personal life, she searched for an archetypal image that could accept her the way she was. Mother Teresa came to her mind, followed by a reduction in her anxiety level from a 7 to a 4 on a SUDS scale of ten.

Chinese medicine, with its knowledge of the acupuncture and acupressure points, complements this imagery work well. Along with using archetypal or personal healing imagery, the therapist can suggest that the patient self-touches an acupressure point on his or her heart with the right hand, and a point just below the navel with the left hand. These points can provide an anchor, so that anytime an unwanted feeling arises in the patient's life, these points can be touched, outside of the session. Similar to when the master hypnotherapist Milton Erickson (Rosen, 1982) said, "My voice will go with you," here the tool of self-touch goes with the patient and serves as an anchor in difficult circumstances, even outside of the therapeutic encounter. One anchoring point that often proves useful is Conception Vessel-17, located at the center of the heart chakra according to Taoist theory; and according to Chinese medicine, this point functions to "unbind the chest" (Deadman, 1998, p. 518). This point, also called the Sea of Tranquility (Gach, 1990), is on the center-line of the breastbone, four finger-widths up from the base of the breastbone, in an indentation there. To contact our heart's energy we touch this point with the middle finger of the right hand or the whole hand, make small circles, stop, breathe, and feel the energy.

Shelly practiced this method, and with the middle finger of the left hand she also touched her Tan Tien acu-point, beneath the navel. The Taoists believe this point is the power center of the body. Shelly was the first patient with whom I tried this physical method of self-soothing, suggesting it to her as an experiment. She later described this self-soothing as one of the most beneficial tools of her therapy.

Self-soothing is deemed by psychoanalytic psychotherapists to be important to repairing the Self (Kohut, 1971, p. 64; Pearlman & McCann, 1992), particularly when soothing was not provided by a person's early primary caretakers (Schore, 2003, p. 171). Bodymind Healing Psychotherapy proposes that physical self-touch of the body, in general, and on particular acupressure points on the heart (CV-17, also called Ren 17) and the belly (Ren-6, Tan Tien), adds a key dimension to self-soothing. I have had many patients tell me that this is one of the things they most remembered about our therapy.

After my work with Shelly, I was feeling that sense of accomplishment and personal satisfaction that comes from having discovered a new addition to the realm of psychotherapeutic healing. I presented this at a few major conferences to the acclaim and appreciation of my colleagues, as I wanted to spread the word and see if it worked as well for their patients as it had for mine.

Then one day while I was doing some anthropological research, I was amazed when I saw a picture of the Chiltan Spirit Posture, which shows standing figures that have one hand on the heart and the other on their belly (Goodman, 1990). It was exactly what I was doing with my patients. I discovered that this posture was found in Alaska, Arizona, and Tennessee, on the

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Northwest coast of America, among the Olmecs in Central America, in Bolivia, as well as in Asia in the valleys of Uzbekistan (Gore, 1993, pp. 60-61). At first I felt deflated that the contribution that I thought I had made to the field of psychology was known back so many years ago. But, then I felt a sense of deeper satisfaction that I was aligned with my psychological colleagues from ancient times who took the time to carve out in wood this healing totem, rich with potential healing meanings. Re-discovering this self-soothing gesture was another step on my path of traveling into the earlier roots of psychotherapeutic healing “before modern psychology ‘began’ in the laboratory of Wilhelm Wundt.”

Though we cannot be sure of what meanings these totem carvers intended, it can prove phenomenologically enlightening to follow the tradition of psychological archeology that was developed by Dr. Felicitas Goodman (1990) and her colleagues, and explore holding postures and repeating hand gestures used by indigenous traditions. From doing so, I felt a renewed sense of connection with the importance of a primordially based psychotherapy.

Drawing from psychotherapy’s age-old indigenous origins provides a deeper root system that helps all the branches of modern psychotherapy. Touching the heart and belly have cross-cultural healing significance from the chakras of Hinduism to the energy centers of Taoism, and as we see, are also represented in Native America. Chinese medicine gives us more than just these two points to help alleviate anxiety. For example, Kidney-1 (located on the ball of the foot, in the middle, slightly in front of center, toward the toes) is particularly helpful for public speaking phobias. This point is also helpful to ground energy, bringing it down from the head, at times when the ego experiences fragmentation under stress. The Kidney meridian in Chinese medicine is used to deal with the polarity of fear and vitality/strength.

Shelly eventually became more comfortable discussing her anxieties and panic attacks with her boyfriend. Another step forward on her path came after telling her boyfriend her deep dark secret about her panic attacks, after which he shared a secret with her regarding abuse in his childhood. This led to increased intimacy between them. Another sign of Shelly’s growth was that she was able to better handle the job stressors of being a graphic artist.

In our termination session, after about six months of therapy, Shelly said, “It’s not that feelings of anxiety don’t arise anymore; but they haven’t turned into panic for a long time because I’m able to soothe myself when they arise. I look at life’s difficulties as an opportunity to practice ‘sinking my Qi.’”

Internalized messages from our childhood often contribute to the scattering of our qi, or in psychoanalytic parlance, “fragmentation.” For this reason, we all can benefit from a practice that uses breath and “stance” to constellate our observing selves. From this place of compassion and equanimity, as we watch abusive thoughts arise, we can find a way to return to our ground in kindness and appropriate self-assertiveness. By integrating Western psychotherapy with the body-mind-spirit healing methods of qigong, the modern person may benefit from the joining hands of Eastern and Western traditions.

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1 Los Angeles Times, (1993, April 24). Billions spent on new hypertension drugs, p. A-17. Prescriptions for just one class of anti-anxiety drugs, the benzodiazepines, are estimated as costing being between $100-800 million a year. A variety of questions have been raised as to whether the new drugs that are coming onto the market are really superior to the old ones. New drugs, including calcium antagonists and ACE inhibitors, add $10 billion to consumer costs over old diuretics and beta-blockers, with scanty evidence to prove that they are superior.
2 Altrocchi, J. (1994). Non-drug treatment of anxiety. American Family Physician, 10, 161-6. He reports that 10 percent of adults have an anxiety disorder, yet only one-fourth receive treatment. Treatment is usually given in a general medical setting rather than through the mental health system. Most patients with anxiety disorders are treated by non-psychiatrist physicians who are generally more familiar with pharmacological management of anxiety. However, non-drug treatment can be more effective and may be both more time-efficient and less risky.
3 For example, Elmer Green, in the Copper Wall Project at the Menninger Clinic, scientifically documented the energy activated by healers from a variety of traditions entering into a meditative altered state. See Green, E., et al. (1991). Anomalous electrostatic phenomena in exceptional subjects. Science, 252, pp. 79-84.
4 Archetypes, as Carl Jung said, are “energy potentials.” When internal representations of the people in our own lives are insufficient as healing images, our wider psyches can activate archetypally energized images from the wider whole of which we are a part to promote healing. I discuss this idea of moving from the personal to archetypal level as a therapeutic strategy in Chapter 25 using Tai Chi Push Hands movements as an initiatory analogy.