

HEALING M.E.

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Published Spring/Summer 1997 Issue 6
Journal of Shiatsu & Oriental Body Therapy

NAMING THE ILLNESS

First we need to clarify the naming of this illness. The most widespread is ME, or myalgic encephalomyelitis. Myalgia refers to pain in muscle, and encephalomyelitis to inflammation of the brain and spinal cord. The name Chronic Fatigue Syndrome describes the predominant symptom of chronic fatigue well. It has also been called Post Viral Fatigue Syndrome, as it often begins after a person has contracted a cold, flu or other virus. However ME often begins without a person first having a viral infection, so this name is rather inappropriate.

ORTHODOX RESPONSE TO ME

At first ME was very slow to be recognised by orthodox medicine. This was probably due to the large number of symptoms, which vary a lot between afflicted individuals, and to the lack of obvious measurable physical changes or pathology. Unfortunately, because of this, ME sufferers were often told that the problem was "all in their head", and many were prescribed with antidepressants or other mood-altering drugs, or psychiatric treatment. Likewise the press often depicted ME as "yuppie flu", with the implication that the illness was caused by over-indulgence or a lack of will to work. Yet those with ME generally knew it was a physically based illness. The severity and persistence of the physical symptoms were just too strong.

Thankfully ME is now being taken more seriously. Some scientific evidence for a physiological basis is emerging, and the widespread and common occurrence of ME is forcing greater attention. However it is still an illness which largely baffles orthodox medicine, which has come up with little in the way of effective treatment. This has meant that many sufferers have turned to complementary medicine, where many have found greater understanding and relief from the illness.

I have found that a combination of shiatsu, dietary and life style advice, and simple counselling effective with many people, and wish to report my understanding of the causes of ME and a healing strategy in this article.

TYPICAL SYMPTOMS OF ME

There are a wide variety of symptoms with ME, and for this reason it is aptly called a syndrome, meaning a pattern of symptoms. The wide range of symptoms is one reason for the difficulty of the orthodox medical approach in understanding the illness. The orthodox approach works better where symptoms are focused in a particular organ or part of the body, so that a treatment can be worked out to help with that particular part. Oriental medical theory is much better equipped to understand these varying symptoms, and therefore is able to come up with definite treatment strategies. Here I want to go through the most common symptoms of ME, and in the next section see how we can make sense of them using Oriental medical theory.

Chronic Fatigue

This is the most obvious symptom of ME. It can vary in intensity from unusually great tiredness, to having to sleep for 12 to 16 hours a day and not having the energy to walk more than a few yards. It can be difficult for non-sufferers to imagine what this feels like, especially as those with ME very often don't show any obvious signs of being ill. For many sufferers it feels like that period after the fever of flu has gone, and you are left feeling totally washed-out, with an aching body, and no energy to do anything. However for someone with ME this state may go on for months or years, rather than just weeks.

Muscle Weakness

This is also a very characteristic symptom of ME. The muscles seem very weak, and a sufferer is limited in what they can physically do in a day. If a person over-exerts him or herself, they pay for it afterwards in feeling much worse, often for days. It may just be walking an extra quarter of a mile, or staying up a few hours later than normal. This is a very frustrating symptom, which can lead to a lot of worry and despondency, and the feeling of great limitation.

Psychological Symptoms

Part of the pattern of symptoms of ME is a range of psychological problems. Typically sufferers are depressed, and easily sink into despondency and despair. Their mood can swing greatly, often following the rise and fall of

their physical symptoms and energy levels. There is frequently a tendency to worry, and sufferers often seem preoccupied with themselves and their illness.

I would say that these psychological states are very much part of the illness along with the physical symptoms, but are also created or exaggerated by sufferers' reaction to the illness. It can be very difficult to accept and cope with the loss of energy, requiring cutting out a lot of activities and pleasures from life, and frequently difficulties in earning money. The experience of walking on a knife's edge, where one little over-exertion, wrong food or drink can make you feel worse for days is liable to make people worry, examining how they are feeling and all their actions in what might seem morbid detail.

Other Symptoms

Other common symptoms include:

Aching joints, bones and muscles

Headaches

Poor concentration and memory

Feeling cold, both at the periphery and deeply within the body

Swollen lymph glands

Digestive disorders such as constipation, diarrhoea, colic, irritable bowel syndrome, and Candida overgrowth

Skin sensitivity

Feeling overly sensitive and vulnerable

Numb or tingling limbs

Lowered immunity with susceptibility to viruses both before and during ME

Allergies

Insomnia

Lack of sweating and/or sudden sweats

Lack of co-ordination

Poor balance

Frequently the onset of ME follows a period of great stress or emotional strain

ORIENTAL DIAGNOSIS

When I first came across this kind of list of symptoms, it excited me to see just how much Oriental theory threw light on what is happening. Here is my analysis.

Depleted Kidney Energy - as shown by:

fatigue
increased need for sleep and rest
aching bones and joints
poor concentration and memory
feeling of cold deep within the body
depression
despair and despondency
insomnia
poor balance
onset after great demands and stress
lowered immunity

Depleted Triple Heater - as shown by:

aching muscles
skin sensitivity
feeling over-sensitive and vulnerable
feeling cold
swollen lymph glands
numb or tingling limbs
lack of or excessive sweating
allergies
lowered immunity

Depleted Spleen Function - as shown by:

weak muscles
tiredness
digestive disorders
worry
preoccupation with self

Small and Large Intestine Problems - as shown by:

digestive disorders
poor concentration
allergies
lack of co-ordination

My touch diagnosis of clients with ME confirmed this diagnosis, with the Kidney and Triple Heater meridians generally being extremely kyo. The Spleen

was generally pretty kyo, and often Lung too. Often there felt to be very little Ki in the head as a whole (explaining the thinking difficulties). The Small Intestine, and sometimes Large Intestine meridians and hara diagnostic areas were frequently kyo, and on palpation the intestines felt weak, hard and blocked. Clients usually felt kyo over their whole body, and hara was weak, although sometimes the Liver and Gall Bladder meridians were jitsu (especially in the type of person who had pushed themselves to be very busy over a long period of time). Ki over the whole body usually felt sluggish and not flowing well. Clients also felt very sensitive to touch, and were vulnerable to strong pressure feeling invasive and painful.

THE CAUSES OF ME

Overall the picture with ME is of depletion and lack of nourishment. The majority of clients I have seen had clearly been pushing themselves beyond a healthy level of energy output for years, often with high levels of stress. This resulted in deep burnout, and great depletion of Kidney Ki. A few clients didn't have a history of over-activity or stress, but still had greatly depleted Kidney Ki. This was generally due to recognisable causes, such as many late night parties, regular recreational drug use, and poor diet. In particular a diet with many extreme Fire foods like tea, coffee, sugar, sweets, alcohol, soft drinks, and processed foods, and a lack of good quality Water and Metal foods like whole grains, breads, pastas etc., fresh vegetables especially root vegetables, beans, mildly salty soups, and good quality animal food such as fish.

I feel the very kyo condition of Triple Heater is due to the great depletion of the Kidneys. Along with the depletion of Kidney Ki is a depletion of Essence, which is stored in the Kidneys, and in Original Ki which is derived from Essence. One view of the Triple Heater is as an avenue for Original Ki to move to all the organs and meridians of the body. With insufficient Original Ki, the Triple Heater function is weakened, and the whole body is starved of Ki. This results in the fatigue, muscle weakness, inability to think clearly, and many of the other symptoms of ME.

Another view of the Triple Heater is that it has the function of "letting out", in particular letting out Defensive Ki from the Upper Burner to the skin and muscles, and Nutritive Ki from the Middle Burner outwards to nourish the whole body. Those with ME are clearly lacking in both Defensive and Nutritive Ki, due to the poor functioning of the Triple Heater. Furthermore, when the "letting out" function the the Triple Heater is not working well, blockage in

the flow of Ki around the body occurs, which I found to be characteristic of the those with ME.

The lack of energy and weakness is a clear indication of weak Spleen function. The over-exertion, or lack of healthy food and drink, will obviously create this kind of Spleen imbalance. In some of my clients with a history of over-exertion there was an underlying lack of self-esteem and self-value, and consequently they found it difficult to accept or give themselves the nourishment in life that they needed. In those clients where diet seemed an important contributing factor to illness, there was an abundance of processed foods, lacking in "life force", and often with a lack of warming well cooked dishes and an abundance of cold drinks, both factors which weaken the Spleen.

ME is frequently accompanied by digestive problems, and a poor condition of the intestines. Such dysfunction of the small and large intestine may well be a contributory factor to ME in some people, as it is liable to create fatigue, weakness, and a negative or depressed outlook.

HEALING ME

Because of the depth of imbalance with ME, I feel that no one single method of healing is usually going to be particularly effective alone. A range of methods is likely to have a greater effect, and here I will describe those which I have found to be of most use.

1. Rest and Sleep

This is necessary because of the deep depletion in Kidney Ki, Essence and Original Ki. Possibly the most important element in healing ME is to help a sufferer to recognise their available energy, and to daily make sure that their energy output is less than that available, so that the extra energy can go towards healing their body and building up a reserve. In a healthy person, the reserve is large, so a few days or weeks of late nights, over-activity or stress can be recovered from in a short time with sufficient rest. However with ME, a person's reserve is very small, and it needs to be very carefully nurtured so that it can slowly grow.

A person with ME may need help in planning a reorganisation of their life, where they can reduce their energy output or stress, and get more support from family or friends, say in shopping, cooking, or looking after children.

2. Shiatsu

Regular shiatsu is often felt to be of great benefit by ME sufferers. The very kyo Kidney and Triple Heater meridians, along with Spleen, Small Intestine or whatever other meridians present as being kyo can be tonified. I have found the Zen Kidney meridian in the back and around the edge of the sacrum very useful. If the Liver and Gall Bladder or other meridians are found to be jitsu, these can be dispersed, but I would recommend concentrating mainly on tonification, as I found that too much dispersal of jitsu can leave a client completely wiped out.

Some tsubo, which are likely to be deeply kyo, and may be useful in treatment are:

To help Kidney Ki - BL23, GB25, KD3, KD7.

To help Original Ki and overall energy levels - GV4, CV4 (Gate of Original Ki), CV5, CV8.

To help the Spleen - SP3, SP6.

To help the intestines - BL25, BL27, LI4, ST25.

To help the Triple Heater - TH5.

Because the Triple Heater is so low in Ki, there is little protection, so gentle pressure is needed. With severe ME very light pressure is all that can be taken, or even just off the body palm healing can be used at first. If you use too much pressure, the client may report feeling worse for several days after your treatment.

Besides treating kyo, shiatsu generally helps in getting stuck Ki to flow. My feeling is that this is one of the main ways that shiatsu and some other kinds of bodywork can be helpful to those with ME. This is especially true if a person is pretty inactive, so their own movement and exercise is not getting Ki to flow.

3. Exercise

Vigorous exercise is out, as it will create a relapse into greater fatigue and muscle weakness. There just isn't enough Ki in the muscles to support energetic exercise. However with ME Ki circulation tends to get stuck, so I have found that simple stretching exercises like the Makko Ho exercises are very useful to get energy moving, without exhausting the client. Breathing exercises are also useful, such as simple abdominal or hara breathing. This tends to build up Ki, and can also help people not to sink emotionally into depression and despondency.

4. Psychological Help

Some clients, particularly some years ago when ME was relatively new and often undiagnosed by doctors, were greatly relieved to be told that they had ME, that there was a definite reason for all their problems, and it wasn't just all in their minds as other people had told them. They may have been battling on, trying to pretend that they were not in fact ill, while feeling worse and worse in themselves.

ME is still a largely "mystery illness", and I find clients are often relieved to learn that their particular collection of symptoms do have some explainable cause in their body and life style. Furthermore, this understanding of ME can give hope by leading to a possible way of getting out of their suffering and healing the problem.

It can help a lot to emphasise how much a client needs to sleep, rest, and get support from those around them. Many people are reluctant to receive help, and feel guilty about receiving so much. They may need frequent warm encouragement to value themselves and their needs more highly.

5. Dietary Advice

I offer dietary advice to nearly everyone with ME, as I feel it can be very helpful. Needless to say some clients take up the offer, and others don't. Care has to be taken not to pile on too much work for the person with ME. It is very helpful if another person can buy and prepare food some or all of the time.

I advise moving towards the following diet as much as a person is easily able to do.

40-60% whole grains and whole grain products like noodles, pasta and bread. Around 30% fresh vegetables, with a roughly equal amount of roots like carrots, burdock and mooli, round vegetables like onions, swede and turnip, and greens such as broccoli, kale, leeks and spring greens, with some salad if desired. In particular I recommend some well-cooked root vegetables, say in soups or stews.

Around 10% beans and bean products like tofu and tempeh, that is one or two helpings a day.

Fresh fish two or three times a week.

Soup daily, lightly seasoned with sea salt, miso, tamari or shoyu, to provide minerals, plus a little sea vegetable like dulse or wakame if a client is amenable, to supply further minerals.

Fresh and dried fruits.

Seeds and nuts.

Non-caffinated drinks such as bancha (three year twig tea), Yannah, Caro, Barleycup, apple juice, carrot juice, and occasional (but not excessive) herb teas.

This kind of diet avoids the extremes which exacerbate ME (many ME sufferers find even one cup of coffee or tea or one alcoholic drink makes them feel much worse), and nourishes Kidney and Spleen Ki.

6. Learn Patience!

Recovery from ME takes time, not surprisingly as it takes time to rebuild Essence and Kidney Ki. I've not seen anyone make a rapid recovery, usually it is gradual, and along the way there are ups and downs.

When a person with ME starts feeling a bit better, they may start rushing about, relieved to be able to get back to normal, and then suffer a relapse as they quickly use up the small reserve of energy they have built up. When recovery is taking place, a client needs to be encouraged to only add activities back in their lives at a slow pace, keeping to the principle of putting less energy out than they have available, so their reserve of energy keeps building up. This process needs a lot of patience! And I feel it helps if a person has reflected on how their attitudes and life style originally created their ME, and have decided to make changes within themselves and in their lives towards greater health.

I hope that this article may help further the understanding and healing of ME. There certainly seems to be an increasing number of people suffering from this problem in our society. I am sure that what I have presented here is still a partial view of ME, and if any readers feel that they have other particular insights into ME I would be happy to hear from you.

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